



DEMON IN EXILE SERIES BOOK 1

FIREFANGED

RORY SURTAIN

*"AN EPIC DEMON-SLAYING FANTASY
ADVENTURE SERIES"*

Firefanged

A Demon in Exile Novel

by

Rory Surtain

Bad Flannel Divergent

USA

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—*The Demon in Exile Saga*—

Firefanged
The Scarred Man
Sorrow's Twin
Wind Catcher
Black Fortune
The Gray Prince
The Devil and Koki-Ten
Storm Sister
Vigil Storm (Finale)

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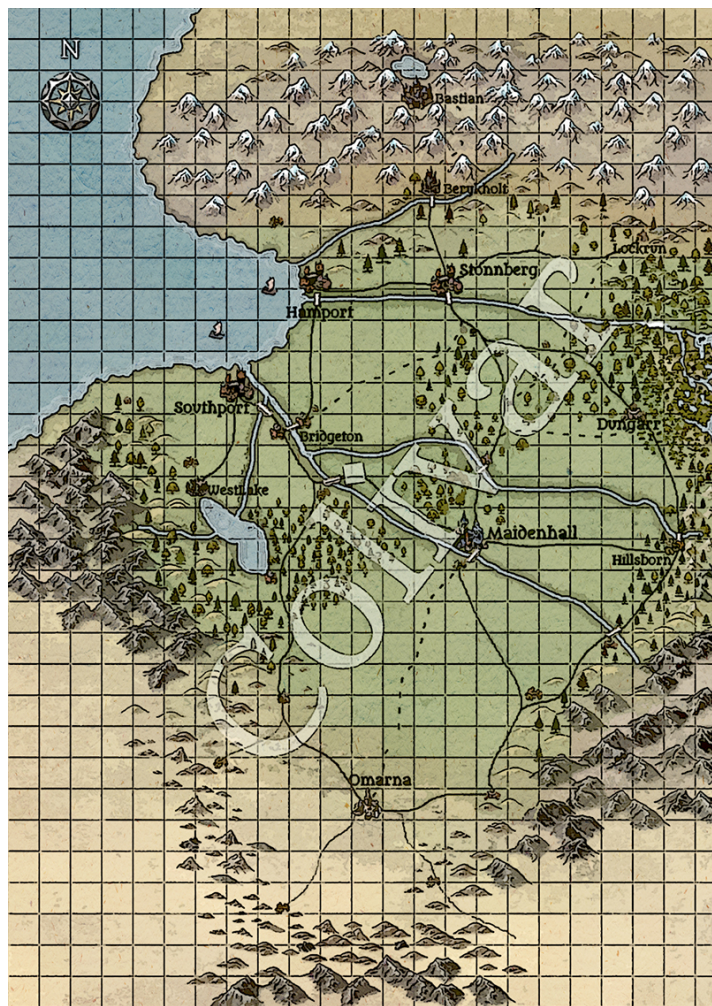
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Map of Colivar



Prologue

Shadow demon

Katie yelled, “To the Barn! Run, Cy! Run!” She leaped off the cedar post beneath the corner of our front porch.

Our eleven-year-old bodies flew across the barnyard in the deathly silence of midnight, sprinting toward the dark maw of the tall, aging building. Back inside our house, we could barely make out the banging and rumbling of an unseen beast until it reached the porch, and the harsh sound of the night-demon’s claws shredding the old wood planks brought a new terror to our hearts.

The final, defiant scream of our mother had roused us moments before, telling us to go. A screeching growl in the room below us signaled the demon’s triumph and its intention for more. We heard it charge up the narrow stairs of our house as Katie and I slipped out the window of our bedroom. The shingles of our porch roof were wet with dew; our bare feet slipped on the wood as we scurried to the edge and slid down to the ground.

The heavy barn door was open, and my target was invisible through the gloom. A heavy rope hung in the center of the barn, tied to the rafters more than twenty feet above us. We both knew it was there, and I jumped as high as I could, frantically climbing with bare hands and feet up the thick cable. Katie, my twin sister, followed on my heels as we shimmied upward together. It was a race we’d done many times that summer as we helped our father ready the loft for the upcoming harvest.

I was almost twenty feet up when a scuff on the dirt floor near the doorway drew my attention. The heavy rope began to sway erratically,

but I hung on until it settled, not daring to look down.

“Katie!” I sobbed. “Katie!!!”

An inhuman laugh circled the barn, but I saw nothing, nothing but shadows. My sister was gone. The thick rope had been sheared off more than a dozen feet from the ground.

I hung from the line until my muscles burned and finally failed; I slid down into the night below.

Bar Sinister

The edge of oblivion

I was a House of War, waiting to be reborn.

In the middle of nowhere leans a bar that never closes. There weren't many worse places to spend eternity but having Memeton as a drinking companion helped pass the Cycle. Memet, an Arch Priest of the Infernal Dominion, is the one connection I have to my late bellipotent father, Hal-Raekorn the Elder, Warlord of the Cycle and Stalwart to the Master of Infernal Reality. We demon-kind really are a poetic bunch when it comes to our names and titles. It helps pass the time between blood baths.

The Outer Domain is the universal counterpart to the Infernal. It runs on cycles too—seasonal, annual, epochal. It is a realm of pseudo-mortal beings. Its elements of power: earth, air, fire, and water, are the building blocks for everything in that reality, but the spirits, schemes, and scars of the beings there define the political landscape and the boundaries of each realm. Their gods are much more hands-off than mine.

The Infernal Cycle runs off a different thread of time with a cadence set by the High Prince himself. It is on his word alone that the rules of our domain exist, and it is in his name that our Houses grow in stature or fall into ruin. Our elements are war, death, pestilence, and strife. Fury, ruin, and plague are the tools that help shape our domain. As our Cycle turns, the end goal is always to bolster a House's standing in the cyclone we call reality, regardless of the High Prince's unbending will.

Memet offered me a bitter brew, "You should enjoy all the strength that your twin in the Outer Domain brings you. In time, you'll have a

chance to reclaim your place with even greater power. As a Warlord of the Infernal Cycle, you are the House of Hal-Raekorn, but you are also *Firefanged*, so use it.”

Firefanged. There was a Pyrrhic victory in the splitting of a soul. If only Hal-Raekorn the Elder had thought twice about his schemes.

“Infernal titles aside, while I have *Exile* to remind me of my station, there is nothing in the Outer Domain to sustain my other half. This situation does me scant good if Baron Maltheus or one of his Pestilent minions goes hunting through the Veil.”

Memet smiled, “I suspect Queen Lis-Xiana and her brood of assassins will soon become involved, a Death House carries the sharpest of claws.”

“Oh, black joy. It’s time for another drink.”

Chapter 1

Storm on the Horizon

My traps were empty, again, and the mid-spring forest was unseasonably still. I'd always worked the area far and wide to minimize my impact on the local populations. There should have been growing animal activity this close to summer. Instead, it was the complete opposite.

It was on nights like this that I felt abandoned. Being alone or out of luck wasn't the point of the dagger that pricked me. I'd always hunted and trapped the bounds of Lockrun's long valley by myself, knowing that another would merely split my hard-earned take and distract my senses when I needed them most.

I followed a familiar game-trail under the light of a waning moon, wishing to find a sign of life, a sound, a track, or a fresh scent to follow. Those distractions were welcome. Farms in the area always had problems with wolves roaming down from the foothills, and the logging camps to the east were often set upon by mountain lions. The local streams hosted moon crabs as well as beavers and drew plenty of critters into my snares.

The night's utter stillness was a void to be filled with memories that simply didn't exist. Lacking enough of those, I was vulnerable to the month-long run of nightmares that continued to gnaw through my head. More than anything, they'd become the motivation for working nights while the rest of the frontier town remained safe behind its rough-hewn timber walls.

My string of dark dreams had arrived out of nowhere with the beginning of spring. The vivid images felt like taunts more than omens.

Walls didn't matter. Sanctuary was an illusion. Disease would take us all. You get the picture.

No, I wasn't a seer or a witch. I was merely an orphan, almost a man, with a heightened set of senses for the world around me. Pastor Riley once said that I had an eye for hunting, though in truth, more of a nose. While my eyesight was uncanny at night, my sense of smell could detect and discern predators and prey better than any hound.

This wasn't the first time I had picked up something rotten on the wind, but the nightmares were more than that. Like the smell of a corpse rotting right outside your bedroom window, a dreadful stench rolled through our valley where there should be nothing but fresh streams, flowering trees, and the musky scent of animals in heat. Only I seemed to have noticed the difference.

Forgotten at the age of seven, I'd spent the past eleven years living under the care and tutelage of the local Church of Saint Madge. Pastor Riley and Sister Kay had done their best to pound a solid education into my skull and an appreciation for hard work into the rest of me. Combined with my innate skills for hunting, my future survival was almost a sure thing. Winters in the northeast region of Colivar were tough on everyone.

Pastor Riley has always kept a close eye on me. He often marveled at my ability to read the moods and feelings of those around me and labeled me as empathic. That said, it was my newly rotten mood that had him most concerned. He pegged my nightmares as an overwrought sense of intuition or an unease at the season's slim pickings, but I think we both knew it was something more.

Maybe it was the world, or maybe it was me losing my grip on reality. I felt a storm brewing to the northeast where only clear skies and impassable mountains filled our view. The dark clouds were creeping closer, more so at night than during the day, and I sought to outfox the nightmare.

Lacking a better idea, I ignored the town's curfew bell and began living the life of a purely nocturnal hunter. With a recurring slew of empty traps, I decided it was time to stalk the distant black cloud that visited whenever I slept. The change in the local fauna told me that it was something more real than my imagination. It was more than a

string of bad dreams—or bad luck. It had to be, or I might never sleep soundly again. I figured it couldn't hurt to prove out my sanity, one way or the other, and in that, I was dead wrong.

I had reached the foothills on the edge of the valley, hiking northeast about five miles farther than usual. The moon was barely up, and the game trails were deserted. Thinking it was about time I turned around, I felt a curious tug to the north. Something was out there hunting too.

The wind dropped and night became deathly quiet around me. I couldn't see or smell the other hunter, but I could feel it in my heart of all places, and I knew the exact moment the dark presence took notice of me. My stomach jumped, and my mind flashed with panic.

My nightmares were never like this. What the FETH was I thinking, being out here alone?

Trying to get a grip, I counted slowly in my head to five. Anger arrived to roll back the fear. I would not be cowed; I would not be bullied by whatever dark thing was hunting the valley with me. Instead, I climbed high up a nearby oak and waited.

Being chased up a tree may seem like something a hounded person would do, but in my case, it wasn't, I swear. Any sizable predator would have a hard time reaching the thick limb beneath me, that was true. My perch was cold and uncomfortable, but it was also the perfect spot for a last-minute trap.

A few hours before dawn, in the darkest part of the night, I finally perceived the predator—it was barely a mile to the north. Some scents were louder than others, and the beast smelled wrong. Prey smells of fear and constant anxiety. This hunter reeked of death, and by that alone, I knew it wasn't natural. Somehow, my nightmare had come alive.

Throughout the realm of Colivar, there were always tales of hideous demons lurking in the night, but they seemed more a way to keep children inside the town walls or scare away the competition from other hunters. The duke would post warnings or bounties whenever too many unexplained disappearances occurred along his roads. Most were explained by wolves, lions, or the occasional band of brigands, but nothing explained the shadow that stalked me now.

Still clinging to my tall tree, I climbed even higher, being sure to pick a sturdy branch. Once I was a good twenty feet up off the ground, I lowered my most durable snare rope down to the trail below and looped its other end around the large branch I straddled. I took out my hunting knife and quickly cut the back of my hand, letting a few drops of blood fall onto the ground inside the snare loop below.

I didn't have long to wait. Within minutes, I heard the beast running down the trail, its claws tearing at the loam, and I saw its black mass, twisted and bleaker than the night around it. It leaped the last thirty feet with a triumphant growl.

Now, before you go asking how I could have smelled the beast a mile away or have seen it in the darkest hour of the night, well, you haven't ever met a demon, have you? I am sure that there were folks asleep in their beds, five miles away in Lockrun, that felt its triumphant growl as it sailed through the air that cool spring night.

As it landed beneath me, digging its nose into the turf where my blood had fallen, I slid off my sturdy branch. Still holding onto the snare's rope, I plummeted, and the snare loop flew upward, collaring the black beast's neck. The creature was lifted partially off the ground as I dropped, and the counterweight helped slow my descent long enough for me to land relatively unhurt. The skin on my palms would grow back. I quickly scrambled away, trying to tie off the stout line before the beast could escape.

I had roped a monster.

Pulled up onto its hind legs by the thick cord around its neck, it was a good seven feet tall. Hairless and black, its shape might have passed for a large mountain lion if not for the oversized jaw, fangs, and claws.

As I finished lashing the rope to the base of the oak, the shadow cat spun in place to face me. Its eyes flared with an orange-red glow, showing me the twisted nature of its being.

I froze.

It attacked.

Still hanging from the line, it threw its back legs at me, claws extended.

I dove to my right, the fire of one claw scoring my back.

The beast swung away from me.

I jumped to my feet and counterattacked slashing across its stomach with my hunting knife. My pride and joy, the blade was the only real weapon I had.

A back-and-forth battle ensued. My back gained a few more horribly painful stripes, while I gutted the fiend.

Rancid black intestines tumbled onto the ground, tangling its back legs, but oddly enough, that didn't slow it down.

I was hoping that between the gut wound and the rope cinched tightly around its neck, the beast might be on the verge of death. I tried to work my way around behind it, but it quickly swung to face me.

It continued clawing frantically at the line above its head with its front claws—never taking its eyes off me.

As a hunter-trapper, I don't carry much in the way of heavy weapons or armor. I only had my hunting knife and a few sharpened iron spikes for securing snares. Grabbing one of the spikes, I dove low, jamming it through the beast's back foot and into the ground. Rolling away quickly, I earned another deep gash across my back.

Feth, but that one hurt. I could feel the warm blood running down my legs.

Grabbing another stake, I feinted low, aiming for the other supporting back foot.

In a blur, the beast kicked its gore-covered claws at my face.

I blocked one leg with a hard, downward slash of the knife in my left hand and attacked upward with the iron spike in my right. The spike pierced its left eye, and I tumbled back away as the monster thrashed.

Its claws had scored again, cutting across the muscle of my left thigh.

The solid oak was holding both of us upright. More blood seeped down my leg, and I began to worry that I might pass out before the fight was over. My heart was racing, and time was running out.

Regaining my balance, I switched the knife into my right hand. I intended to attack from its blind left side and end the fight before the beast got free.

I darted right, circling in fast for the kill.

The rope holding the demon in place finally snapped. The beast

folded forward—its huge fangs diving for my neck.

The timing was perfect.

As time stopped, I heard it hiss. I swear it laughed as if it had planned the maneuver all along.

I had no other choice.

Sacrificing my left arm, I blocked its jaws and put everything I had into my final swing. The ten-inch blade was my final bet. I buried the knife up to its hilt in the monster's ear.

I was driven backward to the ground.

The night beast landed on top of me with my left arm clamped in its mouth.

The harsh red light faded from its eyes—the beast was dead.

The whole fight had taken less than a minute, and I shook from the rush of it all.

The ground soaked up the blood from my back as more black blood soaked into my shirt from above. It took several long minutes for me to work my knife out of the monster's skull and several more to pry one of its over-grown fangs out of its mouth so that I could free my left arm. You try doing that with only one arm. The tooth had gone all the way through, and I was sure that the bone was badly broken.

Whimpering, I dragged myself out from under the beast. It was as far as I could go for the moment.

Following habit, I checked it over. There wasn't much of value to be salvaged. No shiny, soft pelt to sell this time. Its skin looked sturdy enough, so I started cutting off long strips of the dark leathery hide, laying them out on the ground to dry or wrapping them around my badly mangled arm. I wasn't able to stand, so I cut out its other giant fang and stowed both in my pack. It was proof of a kill more than proof of life. Whoever found me, I wanted them to know that I'd won the fight before I died.

Somehow, I was able to withstand the shock that arrests most people with severe injuries, but the intense pain had its way with me just like it would with you or anyone else. My eyes leaked. My teeth ground together. My breathing became shallower and more rapid, and I had to fight to keep my mind on track for what to do next.

I cut up some of my rope to make a sling for my left arm. The

beast's rancid gore seemed to cover me from top to bottom, though, in the darkness of the early morning, it wasn't possible to tell how much of the blood was actually mine.

There was a sulfurous stench to the shadow cat's blood—that was for sure—but it was silky to the touch and grew thinner with each passing moment, as if it was slowly fading away.

There was nothing left for me to do. I could try to walk the five miles back to town in the dark or maybe scout out some dry, dead wood for a fire and rest a bit first. I was certainly feeling cold. Nothing else was active in the area, but I wanted to be behind the town's walls before the next nightfall. I tried to stand up, and a third option took hold. I passed out, landing back in the embrace of a cold black cloud.

Feth.

Bar Sinister

The Last Sorrow

Memet was talkative from deep in his cups, “The assassin’s name is *Fei-Krull*. It means ‘fifth claw.’ She was from one of Lis-Xiana’s older broods. There’s only one sibling left in that litter now, and Lis-Xiana will likely have to put the survivor down before it goes insane.”

“Good to know,” I replied. I wasn’t in the mood to talk.

“Or maybe the demon-Queen will just point the whelp at you so that you can do the job for her,” he continued with a chuckle.

Finally, I asked with a sigh, “What is the brood survivor’s name?”

“*Rei-Seeck*. It means ‘last sorrow’ in the language of Death.”

“Apt,” I observed. *Poetic even*.

Memet continued, “Be glad your House still claims its victories, Younger. The killing of *Fei-Krull* has made you much stronger and bolstered your threshold for pain. It should help you heal more quickly beyond the Veil. It should also make Queen Lis-Xiana reconsider her decision to help Lord Maltheus take you down. She has lost standing in this encounter, including her iron-clad reputation. Some may now see her as weakening.”

I pulled out my war-blade and jammed it into the bar top between us, making Memet jump.

“To Exile!” I roared, raising my cup.

“Exile!” echoed back from the otherwise empty room.

Chapter 2

Stitching and Blood

I woke up well after sunrise. I drank the rest of my water and packed up what little I could. In the sunlight, my mind felt clear. The terror of the night's attack had bled away into the ground, leaving me alive but empty. My wounds had slowed to a trickle of blood, daring me to risk standing up. I feebly tied some strips of semi-dry beast skin around my thigh and left arm and began to stagger the five miles back to Lockrun.

I stopped about halfway at a stream to rest and drink, hoping that the extra water would make up for the loss of blood. I probably should have taken the chance to bathe and scrape off all the blood and gore, but I didn't want to pass out in the cold water and drown, and well, I just didn't have the extra energy.

The sun was well past noon as I approached the open eastern gate of Lockrun. I had begun shivering uncontrollably and chalked it up to a mix of blood loss, pain, and exhaustion. The sun had sufficiently warmed the late spring day, but my body couldn't figure that out.

I gave a small wave to the guard at the gate, one of the bailiff's men named Gareth, and with my head down, I kept walking on through. The town bailiff was a bully named Hector Sims, and I didn't need any more trouble.

"Wait!" said Gareth. He held a short staff to my chest.

I looked up at him without a word.

"Ara? Is that you?" he stammered, obviously shocked at my walking-dead appearance.

I gave a short nod and stumbled forward. Gareth reached out to

steady me, latching onto my left arm. An inhuman shriek followed. Before I knew it, a crowd had gathered around me.

Had I blacked out again?

I was on my knees, trying to stand but failing. I was surrounded by prey. I could barely lift my head. A low vibration thrummed in my chest, almost a growl, and everyone kept their distance.

“Is it a monster?” someone yelled from the crowd, receiving a few nervous chuckles.

I must have looked the part, and I’m sure that I smelled like the Infernal. I was covered top to bottom in gore and strips of black leathery skin. My mangled arm, leg, and back all touted an unreal mix of red and black blood, some of it dry, some of it not.

A young girl with brown hair and hazel eyes pushed her way through the crowd and froze right in front of me. Tears were streaming down her face, and she was calling my name. It was my friend Cat.

What was she doing here?

Her real name is Enricata, and her father is the town’s lord mayor. Being only eleven years old, she was simply Cat. We had been friends for ten years now, and we always watched out for each other. Both of us had lost our mothers. Her mom had died while giving her birth. If I had any sense of family, she would be a sister to me, and I hated to see her cry.

“Hey, Cat,” I whispered. I tried to smile, but it didn’t work.

The girl cried even harder, standing there, unable to touch me, unable to talk, just shaking and sobbing.

Okay, monster, it is.

The blurry crowd around us parted as Sister Kay suddenly arrived with a cart. Strong hands lifted me, and I passed out for good.

###

I awoke in the small attic of the rectory—my room. The window was open onto the square, and a fresh breeze brushed my face.

My thanks to Zephyr for waking me from the dead.

Stitches and bandages crossed my back, my thigh, and my arm. A sling clamped my left arm close to my body. Someone had done the world a favor by bathing me, and I’m sure, burned my old clothes with the Saint’s blessing. Sitting up carefully, I was glad to see I could move

again, and the pain felt much more subdued. There was a small bell sitting on the chest next to my bed, so I gave it a ring. That was enough strenuous exercise for one day. I laid back down.

The concerned face of Sister Kay soon appeared at the top of the stairs. She was carrying a pitcher of water, a cup, and an arm full of clothes.

"Ara, so glad to see you're up and alive," she said.

Not wanting to scare her away, I whispered back, "So glad to be alive, if you could call it that."

I felt the uncertainty and fear running through her mind. Sister Kay paused a moment and forced me a smile.

I smiled back, eyeing the clothes. "Are those for me?"

"Yes, as is the water, though the doctor says you have to drink it slowly." She handed me the fresh shirt and pants. "I'll help you get these on."

I struggled into my clean clothes as Sister Kay propped me up and worked around my bad arm, making sure my bandages and abundant stitches didn't tear open. Their constant pinch was a reminder that I'd found the truth. The nightmares were real. The storm clouds were real, and the black blood proved it for those that dared to look.

Sister Kay was in her mid-thirties and maybe twice my age. She'd been looking after me since I was seven years old.

My mother had made me into a one-time donation to the Church and left town. I don't have a good memory of my mother or my life with her before then. We had traveled together for a long time before reaching the city of Lockrun. All I can recall is a cold, distant expression on her face whenever she looked at me. It was as if she saw me as a stranger instead of her own child.

Pastor Riley believes that my mind is still playing tricks on me, trying to help me deal with the abandonment. He's a smart man. Perhaps he's right.

Sister Kay and Pastor Riley had taken me in and cared for me without any hesitation. As I got older, I helped them too, usually, when I wasn't too busy getting myself all torn up.

"Thanks for the new clothes. Have you seen my backpack?" I asked, unable to get up and look for it myself.

"Under your bed," she answered. "You better get some more rest. I'm sure you will have visitors later. A certain young girl was here this morning wondering if you were still with us. Also, your friend Corey stopped by, but he had to go back to work at the forge. And Pastor Riley will be up soon enough to check on you again."

"How is Cat? I think I saw her at the gate yesterday."

Sister Kay crossed her arms, "You saw her at the gate *two* days ago. Thankfully, Miss Enricata Ramsey is eleven going on thirty. For some reason, she feels very attached to you, but she'll be fine. It's you, Ara, that's got us all worried. I couldn't decide if the doctor was going to run out of stitching or if you were going to run out of blood. It was horrible watching them try to patch you up." She paused, fighting back her tears. "What happened to you, Ara?"

She was a brave woman, though not in a fighting monsters or hunting lions sort of way. She would say what needed to be said or ask about things when she didn't want to know the answer. She was brave in that she cared what happened to me, no matter how much that might scare her.

I did my best to ease her fear, even if it meant misleading her. "I was out hunting that night, as usual, but trappings were scarce, so I ventured a few miles farther north from town toward the foothills of the Everest. It seems that an angry mountain lion managed to sneak up on me. It wasn't a good time, as you can see, but I managed to kill it with my hunting knife and drag myself home."

I wasn't sure that I sounded all that sincere or that she bought my story, but she nodded and said, "Please drink some water and get some more sleep. If you behave, I might even bring you something to eat later."

"Thank you, Sister." I felt relieved she wasn't going to press me further for details.

She left me to rest.

A short time later, I reached under my bed and opened my pack. I found the pair of fangs inside and grabbed one. It was six inches long and dark gray. Dried blood speckled its length, most of it mine, I was sure.

"What have you got there, Ara?" Pastor Riley had come up the

stairs without me noticing.

Too late to hide my work, I replied lightly, “A souvenir?” and showed him the tooth.

“Looks a bit too big for a mountain lion, wouldn’t you say?”

Pastor Riley was letting me know he had already grilled Sister Kay on my story. I hated to mislead them. They had cared for me all these years, and now I was trying to care for them without terrifying them more than necessary. Still, they had both seen the high cost I had paid in acquiring the tooth.

I finally admitted, “It might have something to do with that talk we had the week before last. About the storm clouds and the bad dreams.”

His eyes went wide. Before he could ask me any more questions, a cute, high-pitched voice arrived at the top of the stairs. I tucked the tooth beneath my pillow as Cat stormed into my room.

“Ara! You monster! You scared me half to death! You almost died! You looked like you had died. Right in front of me! How could you do that? You know that if you died, I would never forgive you! Do you hear me?!?” She finally paused to take a breath.

I had seen Cat’s horrified face at the gate and didn’t know what to say to that. I felt dread to the core of my being. Pastor Riley was more than amused by my sudden case of lockjaw, but he jumped in to help me out.

“Cat, you know Ara was just asking me about you and if you were okay after seeing him in such bad shape. I think he was terrified that you would be upset and angry with him. He had been through such an ordeal, and he fought so hard to make it back home, knowing that you would want him to be okay.”

He laid it on a bit thick, but it worked on both Cat and me. Even my eyes got wet, and before I knew it, Cat had wrapped both her arms around my neck and was sobbing into my new shirt.

I used my uninjured arm to hold her, and I told her that I was sorry for what had happened and that I wouldn’t let it happen again. I promised. At least a quarter-hour had passed before she calmed down.

I had nowhere to go.

She got up and stood with Pastor Riley.

“See you tomorrow?” I asked.

She nodded, her eyes still red. “But don’t think for a minute that I’ve forgiven you, Ara.”

I gave her the look of one well chastened, trying hard not to smile.

Pastor Riley quietly spoke as he led her from my little room, “Cat, I need to speak with your father on an urgent matter if he has some time today.”

Exhausted, I lay in bed listening to their footsteps recede down the stairs and out the door.

Chapter 3

Vigil's Mark

Four weeks later, everything changed.

The King's Realm Guard led a long parade of troops through the middle of Lockrun. Their steel-plated armor and surety of spirit put everyone at ease; for one late spring afternoon, the knights pushed back the invisible cloud of fear and despair that had descended like a curse upon our city. Though only six in number, the contingent of Realm Guard rode massive mountain bears. Each rider and bear had the air of predators, confident and hungry, and we all kept a polite distance as they strode past.

Corey pointed, saying, "The farthest knight is Sir Tytus, and his bear is named Ganymede. I can't imagine anything standing in the way of the Realm Guard when a battle starts."

Corey's father was the town's only blacksmith. His family often did repairs for the duke's men and the town guard. Having recently turned nineteen, Corey was a year older than me, but we were of similar height as he tended toward stocky, and I tended toward tall. We both had an interest in the weapons his father produced at the forge. As the apprentice, Corey had the focus and frame needed to take on the work full-time. His path in life was as clear as the muscles under his shirt.

I pointed out the trailing rows of knights and footmen. "Most of the mounted knights are wearing the duke's colors, but I don't recognize those wearing the gray."

"Holy Shrike! Those are paladins! You can tell by the gray tunics and the huge axes that they wield," Corey leaned in close. "They only take to the field for one reason. Demons."

He whispered the final word into my right ear so that my friend Cat wouldn't hear it. She was easily excited, to say the least, and clung to my left arm, nervous at the sight of so many weapons.

Most of the troops were wearing the red of the Duke of Stonnberg, our city's distant liege lord. A few dozen heavily armored paladins and a large contingent of axe-wielding foot sported simple gray tunics with a sun-and-eye symbol stitched onto their right breast. Each of the gray-clad soldiers carried a broad steel shield and a double-bladed axe.

According to Corey, they were sentinels of the Order of the Vigil. To me, the gray soldiers smelled of determination and fear, and I certainly understood why.

The column of almost two thousand soldiers tromped through our city and out the eastern gate, heading to a camp a mile farther up the valley to the northeast. They were on their way into the foothills of the Everest Mountains to engage the enemy.

As if speaking about it would make it more real, no one in Lockrun ever mentioned who that enemy was, but by now, everyone felt the heavy pall that had descended on the town, and there were those of us that knew the truth.

As the last of the gray-clad soldiers marched out of our city's eastern gate, the crowd began to disperse. Corey trotted off, heading back to work at his father's blacksmith shop. Suddenly, I heard the small shrill voice of Cat behind me, "Ara! Run for it! Run!"

I spun quickly to the left just as a big pair of hands clamped on my arm. My knees buckled as rough fingers dug into my left forearm, pressing into a savage-looking scar and the poorly healed bone beneath.

Hector Sims growled from above me, "The lord mayor asked to see you, boy. He's got company and doesn't want to be kept waiting."

Hector was, in my opinion, an overbearing goon for the little city of Lockrun. Lately, he'd used my weakened condition to exact a bit of revenge, though for what I couldn't say. It seemed like everyone was on edge.

My vision blurred from the mind-bending pain, not from any tears that might have been leaking from my eyes, I swear.

Cat stood nearby as Sims and one of his helpers lifted me off the ground, keeping my arms well locked behind my back. She laid into them verbally with everything she had as they dragged me away, but there was nothing she could do to stop them.

The scene might have gotten more attention from passersby if it hadn't played out a few too many times before. For the life of me, I couldn't comprehend why it was happening again. I was still on the mend and had been staying well out of the bailiff's way.

The Lockrun town square fronted the Mayor's house on one side and our church and rectory on the other. A public well and fountain adorned the center of the open area.

Not one to waste time, Sims crossed the square and dunked me headfirst into the water basin. "You need a bath before you can see the mayor."

While I may have agreed on my need for a bath, the bailiff's definition of a bath and mine were slightly different. His version was mostly holding my head underwater while I thrashed around, trying to break free. He was just smart enough to pull me out before I puked into the fountain. Folks would've frowned upon that.

Then onward, I was dragged to Mayor Ramsey's mansion, where Hector Sims and his henchman kindly dropped me on the clay-tiled floor of the large council meeting room. Cat ended up on the far side of the meeting room's heavy wooden door, and I heard her run off soon after.

I want to be clear that I have no problem with authority, but the room was full of it. On that late afternoon, it might have been more than I could stand in my pain-filled, involuntarily wet condition. Regardless, Hector Sims hauled me to my feet and presented me to the lord mayor. I saw a dozen others in the room, many of which had arrived in Lockrun with the troops.

The mayor barked, "Hector, bring him a towel. He's dripping all over the floor, and I can't introduce him like this."

The fact that many in the wide room were also a bit shocked by my wet, disheveled presence eased my mood. I spotted Pastor Riley, looking ashen, hiding in the back corner, and I finally guessed at the reason for my current ordeal.

Mayor Ramsey could see the expression on my face. “Ara, this isn’t a trial or anything of the sort. We have a few gentlemen here to meet you and size you up, so to speak.”

Yea, right.

“All, I would like to present Ara—uh, just Ara—a young and industrious member of our town. He is an orphan that lives under the care of the local Church and our community.”

I care for myself and my community. Let’s be straight about that.

As a well-dressed man in gray stepped forward, the mayor continued, “Ara, please meet Warden Hartwell of the Order of the Vigil. He has come here from the city of Berykholt.”

Mayor Ramsey paused in expectation, and I gave the man, the warden, a small bow, hoping to start things off on the right foot.

Ramsey continued, “Warden Hartwell is the direct commander of all the Order’s troops in the contingent that arrived today. Next to him is Paladin Byrne, an honored member of the Order, and behind Paladin Byrne is Inquisitor Loeb.”

Paladin Byrne dressed the part in a massive set of shiny plate armor and chainmail. He carried a massive two-handed axe on his back and looked like he was ready to go a few rounds with anyone at a moment’s notice. I pegged him at a robust six-foot-four and looked up to him with respect after offering another short bow.

Loeb stepped up, and I could see he didn’t partake in things martial. A man of average height, he wore plain, comfortable riding clothes, and his gaze was one of intense scrutiny. It felt like he could see right into my soul, and I didn’t like it one bit.

Loeb reached out his hand as if in greeting, and I froze. Literally. Unable to move a muscle. Not so much as blink. For a good ten seconds, I did nothing while my mind spun and pulled, trying to regain control of my body.

Loeb looked at me with a question and a glowing sheen of sweat on his forehead.

Unable to breathe, I began to count in my head, allowing that simple mental movement to calm me. It helped me to consider the point of this. It could be a test of power and control, or maybe he just wanted to scare me a bit. Fortunately, I don’t scare easily. I once offered my arm

to a night beast so that I might stab him in the ear, and I still have the fang to prove it.

I wasn't about to stab Loeb or try anything else so drastic. Instead, I continued to count steadily in my mind, and on every beat, I told myself to nod. I intended to nod. Still, nothing happened on my side of the encounter, but on Master Loeb's face, I could see a painful effort begin to take shape. I could see his eyes starting to dilate, and his jaw clenched tightly. He wasn't breathing now either, as if another breath at this point would suddenly break his concentration or control. It was time I switched my intention away from simply nodding, and I added emotion to the scale. Reaching a count of forty-seven, I smiled with both purpose and feeling. Loeb suddenly lost his grip and stepped back.

My first action was to take a deep breath or three. "Well, that was fun," I said, feeling more than a bit drained by the effort. The fountain had been a finer play. My second action was to gauge all the faces in the room. Most held a look of confusion, as if they'd missed something, while others showed worry or, in Inquisitor Loeb's case, irritation mixed with surprise.

It was at this point that the clouds parted in the room and a tall, well-dressed, and surprisingly well-armed man stepped forward. The mayor introduced me to the esteemed Vigil Snow.

The Vigil was an aging yet powerful presence. To me, it felt like suddenly meeting the King. I mean, I had never met the King or even seen him, but it had to be like that, right?

My knees almost buckled as I bowed to him, unable to meet his eyes, and well, I felt the need to lie down on the floor for a bit anyway. Here was a man with such a strength of rightness and authority that he must be the center of all that was happening today and would happen for months, if not years to come. I'm not sure that even makes sense, but it's what I felt at the time.

It was a bit of a shock when Snow spoke in a soft but commanding voice, "Ara, please remove all of your clothes."

Okay, I didn't see that coming.

After another count of ten on my part, Inquisitor Loeb stepped forward and said in a respectful tone, "Please, this is necessary."

I had already taken note that there weren't any women present in the room, so I stripped. *Hey, I'm easy that way.* My wet clothes hit the floor, and I was left wearing nothing but an eye-grabbing fang held by a black leather cord around my neck. Master Loeb began to examine me every which way and even asked for the beast's tooth.

I handed it over. It was almost six inches long and might have belonged to an enormous lion. Loeb sniffed it and grinned. He nodded to Snow.

Vigil Snow presided over the room and began the interrogation, "What happened to your arm?"

"I won a fight with a mountain lion," I said. "We had a difference of opinion on who was going to be taking my catch home late one night last month. I had to sell the pelt to pay for the doctor, but I got to keep its tooth for good luck."

"You find this mangled arm to be lucky?" Loeb continued his inspection. "I can see that it needs to be reset, and it must be causing you a great deal of pain. Frankly, I'm surprised you survived that wound, or I should say wounds. You must have bled near to death."

"Have you met a mountain lion? I've got to say I feel fortunate that I can still feel pain after the encounter, and well, I've always been a strong healer."

"And where are your parents?" said Vigil Snow.

"My mom left me sitting in the church here in Lockrun and said she'd be right back. That was about ten years ago. I never knew my father. Pastor Riley and Sister Kay have cared for me since, though I pay my way these days."

At this point, Loeb interjected, telling Snow: "My vigil, he's clean, somehow, and he hasn't been claimed. Not a mark on him, besides all the fresh scars, of course."

Snow nodded. "Ara, do you understand what a Vigil does?" Noting my blank-faced expression, he continued, "A Vigil pays attention, always. We lead the fight against the Infernal enemy that assails us, the demon-kind that sprout like the plague throughout our Land. The King and his knights and his armies defend our Realm's borders, but we protect what is within them. Throughout history, there are usually a dozen Vigils keeping watch over this realm. There are currently four

Vigils alive today. Besides my company up here in the North, there is Vigil Stone in the West, Vigil Cinder in the South, and Vigil Thorn in the East. We are thinly spread and undermanned, though Vigil Thorn might disagree with that last. She is a formidable thorn in any demon's side.

"We are only accountable to the King, and yet, it is the King that defers to us in all things related to the defense of the realm when the Infernal Horde threatens. The Order of the Vigil and the military follow our lead without question. That includes the wardens, the Paladins, and the knights-marshal all.

"A moon ago, from my castle in Berykholt, I sensed a shadow beginning to emerge in the Everest mountains north of Lockrun, and I sent fast riders to this area to investigate. They were carrying devices that would absorb the essence of the Black. After three hard days of riding up into the hills northeast of Lockrun, these devices turned black and cracked, confirming an outbreak of evil. One of my men, Sentinel Glenn, stopped in this city to talk with the good Pastor Riley about anything unusual happening around here lately. What did you say, Pastor? That you were expecting our visit? Your confidence humbles me."

Pastor Riley just nodded at that, still not wanting to meet my eye.

"And so, Master Glenn returned with a tale of an orphaned teen in Lockrun. A young man that had confessed to this Pastor that he could smell evil to the northeast. A boy who rarely sleeps but has dreams of an evil coming to feast upon his friends and his city. A boy who claims to have fought and killed a mountain lion while he was out hunting one night."

I cut in, "Are you suggesting that I didn't kill it? I've been wearing the pain of that fight for a month, and now I've got a total stranger calling me a liar." I raised my voice. "Are you calling me a liar?"

Let's face it: pain and humiliation make me edgy.

Snow replied carefully, "Yes, yes, I am. Besides being able to sense and fight Hell's minions, a Vigil usually has an ability that we call *clear sight*, which allows us to see the truth in things, in someone's words. We also have extremely skilled and observant resources such as Doctor Loeb here or Sentinel Glenn, who is standing right behind

you.”

I hadn't even noticed anyone behind me in the room, but there he was, giving me a small wave over my left shoulder. Sentinel Glenn was dressed for a fight, with thick leathers and a suitable two-headed axe strapped across his back.

After a pause, Snow continued, “Doctor Loeb, based on your examination of Ara and his exotic tooth, did our young friend here kill a mountain lion?”

I confessed quietly, “No. No, I didn't.”

I knew now that I was dead, so I figured I'd at least confess and cleanse myself one final time and meet my end on solid ground. The verdict was coming in any time now. I could feel it slowly filling the room.

Vigil Snow pressed forward, “Ara, please tell us the real story. I'm sure everyone is interested in what truly happened.”

I looked around the room. “Forgive me for misleading you, Pastor Riley, but it wasn't a mountain lion. It was something else. The beast was hairless and dark, and its eyes glowed a deep, reddish-orange. Its breath stank of sulfur and rot. I had sensed it a ways off to the north that evening, maybe a mile or two out, and even though I was sure that I was downwind of it, the beast was tracking straight towards me and Lockrun. I was afraid that if it could sense me so readily, then it would surely scent Lockrun in the distance and go there next.

“So, I laid my strongest snare trap and used my blood as bait. The trap worked, and I caught it around the neck, mostly hanging from my rope under a tall oak. But it didn't hesitate to attack me, lashing out with its back claws. I gutted the beast with my hunting knife while trying to dodge its attacks. It should have been a quick clean kill too, but it didn't die like a regular animal, not like a real lion. This thing was smart, and it worked on breaking the trap line as it did its best to keep me at bay. I jammed a spike into one of its back feet and another into its eye, and it gave me as good as it got, shredding my back and my thigh.

“It finally severed the trap-line as I was moving in for the kill. It moved animal fast, faster even, lunging forward and biting for my neck. I blocked upward as hard as I could with my left arm while I moved to

the right. As its mouth clamped down on my arm, I plunged my hunting knife through its ear. It collapsed on top of me, dead. Its fang had gone clean through my arm, and I had to cut it from its mouth to get free from the dead beast. It took me most of a day, but I staggered the five miles back to town."

Stunned silence greeted my words. I was expecting disbelief, but Vigil Snow conveyed a look of satisfaction, and I felt the mood shift to pity in the rest of the room.

Eventually, Loeb handed back my necklace, "Here's your demon tooth. Still smells like the *Kjaira* you killed. Beware of its sisters, for they will surely have you marked."

What the feth did that mean?

Vigil Snow retook control of the floor, "Shall we proceed, Inquisitor Loeb? We now have testimony of his vigilance, fortitude, and skill against the dark creatures that threaten Colivar. As Vigil Snow, I move to claim in the name of the Order."

"Seconded, my esteemed Vigil," came the reply along with a deep bow from Loeb. "Sentinel, Bailiff, please secure our man."

"Claim what?" I said, just as my arms were locked in place and I was wrestled to the ground.

From there, I couldn't see much of anything, but eventually, I could smell something cooking and hear a sizzle. *Bacon perhaps?* I soon realized that the bacon was me.

They were branding my right shoulder blade with an iron so hot that I could barely feel it. I was rolled over and received the same brand to my right breast. When they finished, I could see that the brand was a symbol of an eye inside a sun, like what the gray-clad soldiers wore on their shirts earlier in the day.

As the senses in my skin around the deep burns slowly came back to life, my captors let go of me and backed off. I sat up immediately, trying to keep any weight off my burned flesh. I hissed in a fury. It was like I had been pierced front to back by a flaming spear.

My eyes were leaking again, so I stood, naked, shaking in pain, too shocked to speak. I found myself gripping the fang, willing the pain to subside. It was all I could do to survive the moment.

"Your eyes leak like the rain, young man," said Sentinel Glenn. He

handed me a towel and some new pants and underclothes to wear. I didn't think that I would be wearing a shirt anytime soon, if ever.

"We have concluded," said Vigil Snow.

It seemed like a massive weight had lifted from his shoulders. Striding from the room, he gave one more command as an afterthought. "Doctor Loeb, please break his arm."

Bar Sinister

Lion Tamer

The sweet smell of burning flesh roamed around the room. The Infernal incense was milled from the freshly flayed skin of a half-demon, the younger, the better. It fed a hunger in us that would never recede, so, we drank.

"Your first title is within reach, Younger. You're beginning to grow rapidly now, but you might need to slow down a bit before you split your skin," enjoined Memet. "The wings of a Plague will arrive in their own time."

Recent pain-filled events across the Divide were feeding me power in amounts almost greater than I could absorb. "*Firefanged* now seems most fitting, and I must admit that my eagerness to comprehend the title fully consumes me."

"You aren't a true hunter as much as you are a warrior, so forget the hunt and focus on the fight ahead. It will bring you all that you need and more, given the time to grow into it."

"More than I need, I'm sure," I replied with anticipation. "But I can feel the Circles of Hell expanding and contracting as we speak. With two fewer Warlords in play for the High-Prince, the Houses are kindling all sorts of designs and deceit."

"The void that remains is yet another kind of catalyst, for sure. But no one knows that better than the Deceiver."

"The High-Prince planned this all along?"

Memet replied, "Well, it is his reality, after all, is it not?"

On this side of the Veil, for sure.

"So Memet, one thing Hal-Raekorn the Elder never quite grasped is

where you fit in this Circus of Hell. Are you a ringmaster or a lion tamer?" I asked, venting my suspicions.

"Aren't you the lion tamer?" he chuckled.

"That's not an answer."

Memet left my optimistic mood in shreds, "Perhaps you can ask *Rei-Seeck* about it when you see her. Rumors say that Lis-Xiana has also sent her into exile."

Chapter 4

Of Monsters and Men

Spending the following night in the town's jail, I had a cell and a cot all to myself. My forearm was bound in a rigid leather sleeve, from elbow to palm, and my torso was wrapped in a soft, clean cloth. Over that, I wore a plain gray shirt. There wasn't an emblem on the shirt to denote who owned me like the soldiers outside, but I would wear the Vigil's mark forever. Doctor Loeb provided a drink to dull the pain when I entered the jail cell, and I slept like a rock until dawn.

Shortly after sun-up, Loeb returned to examine me. With Sentinel Glenn at his side, neither man looked well-rested, and this somehow made me feel better. I was glad that neither the town bailiff nor his assistants were anywhere to be seen.

"What the feth is a *Kjaira* anyway?" I said, startling Loeb.

He seemed surprised that I could talk, or maybe that I was talking to him after yesterday's ordeal. I had to admit that having my arm reset and wrapped had done wonders for reducing the constant pain of the past month. I could almost feel it healing now. Loeb finished checking my bandages and fit a sling around my left arm.

"How about we get out of here and discuss that over breakfast?" he offered.

I was all in for that.

"So, what do I call you?" I asked them both as we walked outside. "Inquisitor? Doctor? Sentinel?"

"I go by Cornelius," said Loeb, "Though my function within the Order of the Vigil also defines me, so doctor or inquisitor also works. I was a doctor in Stonnberg when Vigil Snow found me. It seems my

exceptional ability at healing was related to a kind of *clear sight* that Vigil Snow mentioned yesterday. It comes in handy when vetting those useful to our cause or, more commonly, patching them up. It also helps me with sniffing out demons and their corruption.”

Sentinel Glenn stepped in, “My official name is Sentinel-Captain Broward Glenn. I’m the captain of Vigil Snow’s House Guard. You can take your pick of which names to call me. I’ll not be offended. Just so you won’t be confused, we often use ‘the Vigil’ to refer to the broader Order of the Vigil, while we just use ‘Vigil’ as a title of office for Vigil Snow, the individual.”

“Ara,” I said, extending my right hand to both. “I’m a bit short on titles or names at the moment, but you can call me ‘Ara the Hungry’ for the time being.”

We arrived at a local tavern, the Red Horse. It was once a stable but that had burned down decades ago, and the owners rebuilt the site into a broad, one-story drinking and eating establishment. The smells flowing up the kitchen chimney provided all the menu anyone needed. Today we were having pork sausages and fresh bread. It was a popular place, and there were a couple of tables of gray-shirted sentinels sitting nearby. I swear I recognized several faces from the Mayor’s meeting room last night. Loeb ordered a round of food and tea for the three of us, and we dug in.

Nearing the end of my breakfast, I pushed the doctor for an answer to my earlier question. “So, what is a *Kjaira*? And why should I be on the lookout for its sisters?”

The doctor replied, “A *Kjaira* is a named demonic assassin. I say *named* because, unlike the lesser demons that we normally encounter, each *Kjaira* has a unique name among all the beings in Hell. Each is explicitly known to the Powers there, as any *Kjaira* would be a threat to their Houses. A *Kjaira* is always born in litters of six, so there might still be five siblings left to finish its job, and just like this one found you, you can bet that the others already know your scent.

“The good news is that they are quite rare in our world, and I have never heard of more than one encountered at any given time. The more powerful the demon, the higher the cost to be paid in crossing over from the Infernal Domain. The chances are quite high that that

was the only one sent through the breach with the rest of the Horde. Lis-Xiana's brood never fails in its mission. How you survived that death-demon's trap was simply incredible."

I corrected him, "I didn't survive its trap; it was caught in mine."

Captain Glenn chuckled, "You underestimate the brood. The Infernal lore we have collected is very clear on this. They have been bred for millennia as highly intelligent hunter-killers and are known to pursue the major demons back in Hell. Lis-Xiana is a Power due to her whelps' prowess and her willingness to lend them to allies in the Infernal Domain.

"That demon could sense you from miles away. It had to know you were up in that tree when it landed on your snare. It must have thought that the easiest way to get you down and kill you was to spring your trap, and even trapped as it was, it very nearly finished the job, didn't it? We don't know its name, but some do, and they will mourn it in Hell."

"How would one find out its name?" I asked, suddenly curious, the fang a weight around my neck.

Loeb answered quietly, "The Vigil has in its employ those with the connections and the means to keep watch on the major happenings beyond the Veil. We use them to predict outbreaks and to track the demons arrayed against us. In time we may know more about that specific *Kjaira*."

"What do you think I should do with its tooth? If the demons can smell it, maybe that's a bad thing for me to be wearing around my neck."

"Now, that is a great question, Ara. Sentinel Glenn can correct my logic here, but assuming the *Kjaira* already have you marked and knowing that you will be far more likely to encounter lesser demons here, I would keep it on. Lesser demons will smell the *Kjaira* and not want anything to do with it. They prefer easier, softer prey. Even a higher-level demon might hesitate unless it had plenty of minions on hand to back it up."

Glenn nodded. "Sounds right to me. And heck, if I had earned it, I would wear it with pride."

I had been holding back on the more profound and pressing

questions, trying to work up to them. “It’s been a very rough month for me, and I need to know where this is going. What am I to the Order of the Vigil? Or to Vigil Snow? Why are you suddenly treating me with respect after that brutal session last night? And why are so many sentinels hanging out here, watching over us?”

The conversations all around us suddenly ceased.

Loeb answered, “We can’t speak for Vigil Snow himself. He will have to explain your position within the Order when he returns from defeating this latest Horde. As to your last question, I should not be surprised that you noticed the rest of Sentinel Glenn’s squad seated around us. Know that many of them spent the night patrolling around the jailhouse while you slept. You are now a valued member of the Order of the Vigil. That is all I will say on that, and NO, you don’t have a say in the matter. Not even the King’s heir would have a choice if he had killed a *Kjaira* all by his Royal self and survived to share the tale.”

I offered no argument there. Yesterday had been one torturous act after another, but things were finally looking up. Having spent the past ten years an orphan with no meaningful path to follow, I could do much worse than having the axe-laden men of the Vigil watching my back.

At this point, Glenn jumped in, “Ara, no one has ever survived a death-demon attack, let alone killed one. Not even Vigil Thorn. I’ve been in the Order for fifteen years now. I can tell you that even the smallest hordes can do insurmountable damage to our towns and people if left unchecked. I know you are young, but with some training and the right equipment, you can make a huge difference in the lives of many.”

We left it there and headed back toward the jailhouse, which was also the Order’s temporary outpost in Lockrun while the military campaign against the Horde was underway. Asking my escort to wait outside, I made an essential stop at the mayor’s house.

Cat was at home as I had hoped, and she quickly pulled me into the parlor and sat me down on one of the wooden long chairs lining the wall.

Seeing her anxiety and not wanting her to get too wound up, I spoke first, “Cat, do you remember the promise that I made to you last month? When I was all mangled from that mountain lion? Well, I need

to tell you, as my closest friend, that while I plan on keeping the promise, I may need to go away from Lockrun to do so.”

I explained that the Vigil required that I go with them so that they could train me to fight demons and that I would be safer and better able to help protect Lockrun and Cat, in particular, in the future. I wasn’t sure she would buy it.

She didn’t.

“You’re leaving Lockrun so you can fight demons and get yourself killed, and you think I’ll be fine with that? Who will look out for me after you’re gone? How will I know that you are alright? Ara, you could barely survive a mountain lion. How do they expect you to do more at your age?” She made good points all.

I didn’t know what to say to any of those questions. I reached into my shirt and pulled out my dark necklace with its six-inch fang. I handed it to her.

Never having seen it, her eyes went wide. In a few more seconds, she began to shake with fear, and I began to regret what I had just done to my eleven-year-old friend.

Cat surprised me. “It wasn’t a mountain lion, was it?” she said, looking cross. She looked at the tooth again, trying to come to grips with it.

I shook my head, “No.”

“It was something way, way worse, and that is why the Vigil and their army are here.”

I nodded.

Before Cat could go any further, I said, “That fang is for you. I tore it from the mouth of the beast that night so that I could get it out of my arm. Wear it, and it should protect you from whatever the Vigil is here to fight. Please believe me in this and know that I will be doing all I can to protect you and Sister Kay and Pastor Riley, and your dad and this city.”

Taking the leather necklace, I adjusted it to fit her smaller size and hung it around her neck. She still trembled with fear, and silent tears rolled down her cheeks. I put my arms around her and tried to convince her that as long as she wore that necklace, she would be fine. I reminded her that she had a birthday coming up next month and

that I was proud to be the first to give her a gift. She gave me a smirk that said I wasn't going to get away with that.

Going on thirty, indeed.

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A knock on the door a short while later pulled me away. I had an appointment with the Vigil armorer next. The visit was complicated by the fact that I still had one arm in a sling. I was given a chainmail topcoat, leather for leggings, and steel vambraces for both forearms. The left vambrace was heavier, and it fit over a rigid leather sleeve. Now, I could block a demon's teeth or claws without further damaging my arm, or so I hoped. The right vambrace was a bit lighter due to the double-bladed axe that I would be carrying. I tried out both the lighter and heavier versions of the Order's axes, and I could have used either. After my showdown with the *Kjaira*, I preferred the somewhat lighter and certainly faster weapon.

My trusted hunting knife sat in a sheath on my belt. After retrieving a few things from the rectory, I asked the armorer to build me something new. He quickly agreed when I handed him the second fang from the dead *Kjaira* and a bundle of black leather strips, which may or may not have been soaked in my blood. With some careful modifications, he fitted a tang and attached the dagger-like tooth to a matching hilt, guard, and pommel. He used the dark rawhide to wrap the grip. I could thrust or stab overhand using the fang as a deadly six-inch dagger.

The armorer also reconfigured a sheath to hang across my lower back so that I wouldn't accidentally skewer myself with the exotic blade. Little things can be the difference in survival.

Well, that and a lot of training.

While we waited in Lockrun for Vigil Snow, Warden Hartwell, and their contingent to complete the task of engaging the Horde to the northeast, we trained, and we worked, and we patrolled the town. I was shown the basics of demon-fighting.

Combat tactics consisted of blocking the initial attacks of a quicker, stronger demon opponent by using a large shield and countering with a deadly chop of some sort. Instead of swords, dual-headed axes were the Order's weapons of choice as the demons' tough hides were much

harder to cleave. The sentinels used a shield wall of sorts to halt the Hellion's charge, and there was literally Hell to pay if it broke.

The lesser demons of the Horde would attack from every angle with a variety of horns, claws, and teeth, overwhelming the sentinels with their ferocity and unpredictable weapons. The fiends ignored all but the most incapacitating of wounds, and as long as a higher-order demon was present to control them, they wouldn't retreat.

In between training, we worked with the militia on wall repairs, and I spent four hours a day chopping wood. The daily exercise and regular supply of food that went with it did much to improve my strength and health. Loeb provided a salve to ease the pain of my burns and kept my left vambrace tightly strapped in place.

Glenn made it clear that he was under orders to keep me and the city safe while the Horde was still afield. There was always a possibility of demons sneaking into the city to wreak havoc on the citizens. After the first week of training, I convinced Glenn to let me scout the area immediately around Lockrun. He thought that that was a great idea as long as he and a half-dozen sentinels accompanied me on patrol.

The surrounding area was still devoid of the typical wildlife. I trusted my senses to pick up anything dangerous or out of place, but we came up empty that night. I did manage to catch a dozen moon crabs on our way back in. Many of the sentinels had decent night vision and made a good go of it too.

The next day, I sensed a shift deep in the hills north of Lockrun. The evil was no longer focused our way but had begun receding. Vigil Snow must have engaged the Horde. The following day I breathed easy for the first time in more than a month. The city around me felt more relaxed, and the day seemed brighter.

Two weeks after I was abruptly inducted into the Order of the Vigil, the army, or at least what was left of it, was led by Vigil Snow and Warden Hartwell back through our city. The contingent was significantly reduced and offered few smiles for the town's citizens. Ganymede was missing one of his brothers, and Sir Tytus was missing two of his. Paladin Byrne looked none the worse for wear, though on closer inspection, his heavy plate armor had several deep scratches and dents in need of repair.

Sentinel Glenn, Inquisitor Loeb, and I attended a meeting with Vigil Snow and Warden Hartwell to hear a report of the battle. The Horde had consisted of five Hell-knights leading a pack of almost five hundred Hellions. It was considered a massive incursion by any measure. Only the demon knights were armed and armored. They carried heavy swords, which, I was told, granted them some control over the lesser demons nearby.

Due to the rough terrain, Hartwell had spared the Vigil's horses, keeping them well to the rear during the battle. Amid uneven ground and a rampaging horde, it cost the Order's mounted elite too much effort to control their steeds and weapons at the same time.

The fight had begun with the heavy-plated paladins and ducal knights holding the center of the line on foot against the Horde's oncoming masses. The duke's spearmen held the flanks just long enough for the Vigil's axemen to counterattack with their vicious axes laying into the engaged mass of demons. The Hell-knights had led from the rear, as expected, pressing their minions forward. Once the battle was wholly joined by both sides, the King's Realm Guard, which had remained mounted in reserve, attacked around the left flank and into the rear of the Enemy's forces. It was their job to take down the Hell-knights, and, in doing so, they had won the battle. The lesser demons fell into confusion as the last demonic general was torn apart by the rampaging Ganymede.

Days were spent hunting down many of the scattered demons, tending to the wounded troops, and burying the dead. At the same time, Vigil Snow and his men also scoured the battlefield for any relics or identifiable weapons. The armor and signature swords of the Hell-knights had rapidly disintegrated upon their bearer's demise. During the battle, their shields were emblazoned with the sign of the Poison Oak. While Vigil records would be further checked to confirm the matter, Loeb was sure that was the sigil of the Infernal House Malthus. The name sounded familiar to me, but I wasn't sure why.

As the surviving army marched back through town, the Mayor announced that the Order had won a great victory in the Everest foothills and that Lockrun was now considered safe. Still, the militia would continue to lock the gates at night, and the predominantly timber

walls would be kept in good condition for the safety of all. I'm sure the Mayor had seen Cat's tooth and was sufficiently motivated. I didn't mind his extra caution.

It was my first view of war, or at least its threats and consequences. These soldiers had lost friends and brothers to the Infernal Horde. They had done their job, and the city was spared the worst. Now, it was time to do mine.

Bar Sinister

Forbidden Crossings

"I am in exile. I am locked away in here," I complained to Memet.

"Don't confuse yourself with the warlord Hal-Noire. He is truly locked in. You exist in two different places at once, but not separately. It is all to your advantage. Your self-survival is shared, and your growth is multiplied."

"I carry the House of Hal-Raekorn here. What am I in the Outer Domain?"

"While your Infernal being is forbidden to cross into the Outer Domain, your soul lives in a state of exile, having an embodiment in two places at once."

"The High-Prince forbids my crossing?"

"He forbids all of his most powerful Houses from leaving his Domain. That is why, with few exceptions, only lesser demons can cross over. The High-Prince's mandate for oversight and control of our reality is eternal. When Maltheus sent the *Kjaira* through, he did so at great expense and with Kasaval's backing.

"And that is why you are stuck in this Infernal bar, this cocoon of sorts; while your other self bleeds, you garner your power. A connection between you and your other self exists through the shared soul that defines you and the eternal spirit that carries on the seed of your House. You leverage common instincts and abilities based on the powers and titles that your House already holds or may acquire in either realm of existence."

"Here, I have eons of knowledge and skill to draw upon, but I am expected to wait for my other half to mature. I don't have the patience

for it.”

“Remember my words about growing too fast. Don’t let your quest for wings tear you apart.”

“If I can draw so readily from him, then he can also learn to draw from me.”

Memet rapped his knuckles on the counter. “That is a secret that Hal-Raekorn earned with the title *Firefanged*.”

Chapter 5

Firefanged

I felt like a prisoner. I had lived an independent life, perhaps from too early an age. Now, I was always surrounded by an armed guard detail and never allowed to go out scouting or hunting on my own. While I understood the wisdom of safety in numbers, especially as a way to avoid conflict, old habits die hard. I wanted to lead the way, not follow along or be escorted.

We left Lockrun for the week-long trip down to the northern city of Stonnberg, Duke Ragir's seat. I had made my goodbyes and promised Cat that I would be back to check on her sometime soon, though I wasn't sure when.

Pastor Riley had given me a thorough once over and his Blessing of the Divine through all the many Saints. Sister Kay wouldn't say goodbye, letting me know that there would always be a place for me in Lockrun, no matter how far I roamed. I got the feeling that maybe I hadn't been so very independent after all. The pit in my stomach as I rode away seemed to agree.

While the King's Realm Guard and the other mounted knights traveled rapidly ahead, intent on their own pace and destination, we marched or rode with the Order's foot soldiers.

I remained armed and was given a beautiful horse, a black gelding named Daur. Its former owner had been buried on the battlefield north of Lockrun. The mount was well-trained and easy to ride. I had never ridden a horse before and was told that I would have plenty of time to learn on the trip westward. While my backside and muscles had plenty to master, generally, my arms and legs found it easy to guide the

animal any which way it wanted to go. As I said, it was well-trained.

Vigil Snow found the time to share his plans for me. We were headed to his stronghold a few days ride north of Stonnberg, the stronghold of the Vigil in this region. The castle and surrounding town were called Berykholt. There, I would be trained further in the arts and tactics of the Vigil. My arm was healing well in its leather and steel vambrace, and I expected to be in much better shape by the time we reached our destination, ten days hence.

The first night on the road, we halted at one of the prepared campgrounds sited along our route every thirty miles or so. Paddocks existed for the horses, and dry areas were set aside for tents and cooking. A large berm encircled the camp, but overall security for the armed force wasn't a significant concern.

I was given a tent with a pair of sentinel guards, Tate and Stevens by name, stationed outside. Knowing that we had another long day on the road ahead of us, I slept, and I dreamed.

The smoke-stained tavern ignored the barren desert and the thick ribbon of sulfur that rode the wind around it. I stepped cautiously inside the dark, dismal abode. The bar's patrons had a sour disposition as if they resented being there or simply resented being. Caged incense hung overhead, and the rotten smell from outside was replaced with the pungent odor of burning flesh. It didn't bother me as much as it should have.

Dreams were just random echoes, after all, right? I could ignore them like the wind.

The bar reeked of predators, like the Kjaira I had slain but on a larger scale of violence, a full cohort instead of a single assassin. There was a strange sword planted in the bar counter, sprouting two feet tall. While it was seemingly ignored by all those around it, I was drawn to it. I heard it rage loudly in my mind. It cried out for release, for blood and conquest. Part of me wanted to grab it from the bar, claim it, and carry it to war. Another part searched frantically for the door.

Of the two patrons sitting at the bar counter, one was built large and dressed for battle, which, to me, was strange attire for a night of drinking. The sigils on his black armor and his scent were oddly

familiar. He was an acquaintance I should remember, but one that I was sure I had never met. The other man was of medium build, dressed in burning gold and black finery. His essence was deeply foreign. It was as if he were made of a completely different substance or were perhaps a different species than the warrior. They had each other's confidence, and their exchange was muted.

As I slowly approached the conversation, my mind still focused on the sword, I couldn't help overhearing the word 'Firefanged' spill from the smaller man's mouth. Instantly, I was engulfed in black fire and burned to the ground where I stood.

I awoke screaming in my tent. The brands under my shirt burned as if they had been applied anew. One of my guards peered in, asking if I was okay. I didn't have an answer to that, so I just got up, shaking with the pain, and left.

The fresh night air felt good, and I eventually calmed down as the burning sensation eased. It was still a few hours until dawn, and not wanting to sleep anymore, I went back into my tent and kitted up with my weapons and chain-mail armor. Their comforting weight helped. I headed to the berm wall of the camp for a long walk.

I wanted to saddle up Daur and ride like the devil away into the night, but I wouldn't risk running the horse in the dark. I might be able to see where I was going, but one wrong step by the steed could mean its end.

Reaching the top of the wall, I began to circle the encampment. The circumference of the berm wall was close to a mile long, and it gave me plenty of time to sort things in my head as I marched along. I drew my fang knife just to be able to feel the weapon in my hand, and I scanned outward from the camp, searching for any threats.

The forest around us was quiet, and I was alone. There was nothing to fight and nothing to explain the vivid, violent ending to my dream. I felt the careless gaze of the room and its underfed light, the berserker rage of the sword, my unknown connection to the man at the bar, and the agony of my sudden conflagration. I had been an unseen observer right up until that last moment, and I had paid a price. That I knew for sure, but not to whom, or why.

As I completed my circuit, I saw that Doctor Loeb was waiting for me. He spoke with an eye on my fang-blade, "Everything all right, Ara?"

Quickly sheathing my weapon, "I just needed to cool off, Doc. I had a rough time trying to sleep."

"It might be some aftereffect of your encounter with the *Kjaira*, perhaps some venom left in your blood. We'll try to find out more when we reach Berykholt. How about another trip around the camp?" he offered.

Thunder rolled in the distance. "Sure, count me in," I said.

Halfway around the berm with Loeb, I felt a baleful tug, not outward but inward toward the center of our camp.

"Doctor, when do the guards change shifts tonight?"

"In another hour," he replied. "Why?"

"An assassin?" I hissed, sliding down the earthen wall.

Sprinting inward, I headed for an area near my tent about two hundred yards away. I kept low, trying to mask my fast approach. As I neared my tent, I could see my two guards talking with a third, a courier dressed in the duke's colors. They were pointing him toward the tent of Vigil Snow.

I put my hand on my back and slowed my approach. I called out, "What? Change of the guards already?"

"Not yet. We were just showing the courier Gibbons here where to find Vigil Snow," said Tate.

"Seems like an odd hour to receive a courier?" I pressed.

Being face to face with the man, I could feel his lethal intent and his growing anxiety at being delayed. The courier offered a calm smile and gave me a slight bow. For some odd reason, that made my mind itch.

"I would appreciate it if you would lead the way. I was told to deliver this message in person as soon as possible," he responded.

"Certainly, sir. Tate, did you check his credentials?" I said.

Tate gave a nod. He answered confidently, "He bears the duke's official seal on his dispatch."

I turned to the courier. "Sorry for the delay. Please follow me." I started off toward Snow's tent in my most official manner.

We were met by Captain Glenn and two sentries at the entrance to

Snow's tent. I took a small step to one side to make room.

"Captain Glenn, an urgent dispatch has arrived for Vigil Snow," I said by way of introduction. "He bears the duke's seal. Oh, and I forgot to mention that I found a terrific bottle of *Kjaira* if you're interested in drinking it with me."

Glenn nodded without missing a beat. "That I would," he said with a smile. "I'll just wake the Vigil so we can see what news the duke has sent us."

Feeling a hot pressure build in the courier, I knew when and how he would make his move. Glenn turned his back on the potential assassin and started to duck into the tent. The dam burst beside me as the courier launched himself forward, drawing a long, dark knife from his dispatch case. I was already spinning into his path, snagging his left foot with mine. Instead of plunging his blade into Glenn's back, he planted it into the ground at the sentinel's feet. Glenn instantly reversed his motion, slamming a rather large boot into the side of the man's head. The guards to either side descended upon the attacker, further pinning him in place.

Inquisitor Loeb walked out of the shadows and tied the man's arms and legs in a less than comfortable position. I guessed that the good doctor knew as much about inflicting pain as healing it. The assassin was likely in for a long ride down to Stonnberg, followed by a short meeting with the duke's executioner.

Vigil Snow exited his tent as Glenn completed a search of the assassin.

"Be careful with this blade. The last one we intercepted was coated in a dreadful poison," said Snow, examining the ornate weapon.

It looked like an antique to me.

"We're traveling with the duke's own troops. Why would he send a courier to kill you?" I said.

Loeb answered, "We don't know who sent this man, though he does carry an official dispatch from the duke."

I was still confused by the attempt. "Why would anyone go after a Vigil? Especially one that just removed a dire threat to the region? Isn't assassination a political act? And how are demons a political concern?"

Snow replied, "Ara, there are some that feel threatened by our absolute power in protecting this land and our success when it comes to dealing with the Black Horde that assails Colivar. Captain Glenn and his House Guard are my most skilled sentinels. Their sole task is to keep me and mine safe, and they've been kept busy these past few years."

"Have any assassins ever been successful against the Order?"

"Sadly, we have lost more Vigils to assassins than demons over the past two decades. These are dangerous times for us all."

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Following Captain Glenn's example, I took to cat-napping in my saddle during the day as we traveled and stayed awake most of the night. My sentinel watchers, Stevens and Tate, were more than happy to train me as it replaced the boredom of just standing guard during the night. Being part of Snow's House Guard, they were experts in close combat against opponents, both human and Hellion, and I was quickly learning to recognize and counter their various moves.

Captain Glenn called me 'a natural' when it came to learning the arts of self-offense. I was rapidly becoming more adept with my axe and learning the subtleties required to wield it effectively. Its considerable momentum and double-blade demanded greater strength and control of its direction and angle of impact. A poorly aimed strike could just as easily injure the wielder as the target.

We also sparred with light sticks against heavily weighted clubs, trying to mimic the speed and quickness of the demons that we would face. The conventional drill was to wait until the light stick was committed to an attack. One would block hard with a shield, or in my case, a heavy vambrace, hoping to push the opponent off balance and then counterattack with the more massive weapon.

Some instinct told me that this was all much too slow. It would allow time for more demons to join in the fight. We would rarely be fighting a single demon, and according to Glenn, they tended to attack in a cohesive mass of teeth and claws. I used my natural quickness and rapidly growing strength to attack preemptively, often with success, then dodge back before the counterattack. The key was precision, avoiding their shield while making sure that my first strike was judged a

killing blow. Soon, due to the speed of my attacks, I was relegated to the role of “practice demon” with only a couple of clubs made of light pine. I found myself slowing to half-speed just to make things a bit more even with my sentinel sparring partners. It turns out pine shatters quite easily.

We reached Duke Ragir’s capital of Stonnberg after a long week. Loeb wasn’t able to get anything useful out of the hostile courier, though the inquisitor did note a foreign-sounding accent to the assassin’s voice when under stress. As expected, we met a small delay in Stonnberg while we handed over the prisoner and then stayed to witness his execution.

Never leave an enemy alive behind you.

Northward to Berykholt, I rode with the Order’s troops. It was another three days before we reached our destination in a valley just south of the Everest mountain range. As we crossed the Westever River Bridge and entered the city of Berykholt, Vigil Snow dropped back to speak with me.

“Ara, welcome to my home. I am sure you are as ready as I am to get off the road. You will be given a private room at the castle, and you will be expected to train each day with the sentinels and their recruits. If you get bored, I will also lend you to the Order’s scouts. They are tasked to patrol and protect the broader area around Berykholt. Doctor Loeb seems to think that your left arm is almost up to the task.”

At the mention of scouts, my spirits perked up. Berykholt was near the foothills of the Everest mountains and offered similar terrain to Lockrun, which was located on the far eastern end of the same mountain range. With summer arriving, the weather would be great for night scouting.

“I’m still dealing with a few aches in that arm, but my sore backside will be quite grateful for a break from the saddle,” I replied.

“In that case, Sentinel Glenn will get you situated. He oversees the House Guard when I am around. Oh, and one other thing,” he said with a serious face. “Please keep your shirt on at all times.”

I watched him as he rode ahead.

Chapter 6

Snow's Keep

The city of Berykholt spread in an unconfined manner across the valley on the south side of its castle. Berykholt Castle was initially built to guard the northern border and could hold a respectable garrison of up to five hundred in times of siege. Anchoring the stone block castle walls were four square towers at the cardinal points of a compass. The castle held a stable and four sizable keeps around a functional courtyard. An area for two hundred yards in every direction outside the castle walls was kept clear for tactical readiness and training.

As the threat of open war was rare these days, most of the Order's soldiers stayed in roomier barracks a quarter-mile west of the stronghold or in the town proper if they had a family and the means to live there.

Captain Glenn showed me into the Vigil's Keep, which permanently housed Vigil Snow, Warden Hartwell, and their families. This last bit surprised me. Traveling in their company the past fortnight, I didn't notice any hint of family life for these men. Perhaps, I saw everything through a disconnected view of the world, but I never suspected their personal life would be so near to their work. Vigil Snow's keep was modestly comfortable, and there were larger keeps allocated for visiting dignitaries and for royalty, and a fourth shared by the castle servants and garrison troops.

In Lockrun, I was content in an attic storage room with a small window for ventilation. It was private enough and had just enough space between boxes for my bed and a small chest. In Berykholt, I was given a full bedroom in Snow's Keep, complete with bed, dresser,

chest, weapons rack, and a great view of the castle's inner courtyard.

The door to my room opened onto a common living area shared by six other bedrooms plus a shared pair of bathrooms. Currently, three of the additional bedrooms were occupied by my constant companions, Glenn and Loeb, and by Glenn's second in the House Guard, one Sentinel-Sergeant Gulliver Barnes. Vigil Snow's and Warden Hartwell's families occupied similar settings on higher floors, and we all shared a common kitchen and dining area on the ground floor of the keep.

I spent my first afternoon cleaning my armor and equipment while watching the comings and goings of the courtyard. In the evening, I took one of my usual catnaps that soon turned into a ten-hour slumber as my head got used to the soft pillow and mattress. Having a quiet night, one free of nightmares, demonic cats, and assassins, was a rare boon, and I felt rejuvenated the following morning.

On my second day in Berykholt, I was invited to attend a welcome dinner with all the Vigil Keep's inhabitants. An Order recruit had shown up at my door late in the afternoon with a word from Lady Rebecca Snow that I would be expected in the dining hall at dusk for food, drink, and formal introductions.

I had been given plenty of sets of day-to-day garments for training and Order activities, so I washed up and put on a clean set of dark gray pants and a light gray shirt. I left my newly scrubbed armor on the rack in my room, only wearing the stiff leather wrap on my left arm and the fang-knife in its sheath on my back. The exotic dagger was growing on me, and I didn't feel comfortable without it.

Entering the dining room that evening with Loeb and Glenn dressed in their finest, I had a feeling I was in for a rude awakening. We were served mugs of warm ale while we waited for the families to arrive. I found my heartbeat quickening with anxiety at the thought of meeting the full families of both Vigil Snow and the Warden of the North. Loeb noticed my worry and gave me a knowing smile. He enjoyed seeing me sweat for once. My experience with family life was sorely lacking, and I would soon be well beyond my comfort zone.

Vigil Snow walked in with Lady Rebecca Snow on his arm. Lady Rebecca smiled and thanked me for attending her dinner party. She was a good ten years younger than her husband and had a healthy

glow about her. Vigil Meryck Snow gave me a formal handshake and introduced his two daughters, Lynda and Meryna. Both spitting images of their mother, they had auburn hair, brilliant green eyes, and healthy complexions.

Lynda was nineteen and just coming of age. She had an attractive, confident smile and a warmth about her when she reached out to greet me. Meryna was fourteen and showed a slight clumsiness that went hand in hand with the rapid changes a girl experiences at that age. Their older brother, Meryl Snow, worked as a liaison for the Order of the Vigil in the court of Duke Ragir down in Stonnberg.

Warden Gabriel Hartwell arrived with his even larger brood. His wife Melody had light brown hair like my friend Cat, with brown eyes and a warm smile. She introduced her four children to me. Oldest was her twelve-year-old son Davin, followed by Gina (short for Regina) at ten, and a pair of six-year-old twins, Derrick and Dale. The kids took after their dad, each with dark brown hair and a mischievous smile.

The twins were fascinated by my arm. They immediately wanted to know why I wore the leather brace, what I was doing in the Vigil, and if I had killed any demons. Gina was the shy one, letting the twins take the lead, while her brother, much like her dad, just grinned, knowing I was in for a long night of intense examination by the young pair.

I was plenty nervous with all the attention as the newcomer at the keep, but I found the seating arrangements to my liking. Lynda Snow had noticed my look of unease and pulled me over to the dining table, putting me in a spot between her and her sister as everyone else sat down. I never had a girlfriend in Lockrun, always keeping focused on my outdoor endeavors and survival. With the direction my life was heading and my new position in the Vigil, I might not even get a chance to have one. Given the opportunity to sit between the two sisters, I pushed my lonely thoughts aside and breathed in their friendly energy and lovely scents. I could get used to this.

Vigil Snow remained standing at the head of the table to offer us a few words: "Friends and family, first I would like to toast the sentinels and remember those of the contingent that were lost during the Lockrun campaign. I am proud to be in the company of ones so dedicated and brave, and I regret that not all will be able to join us in

the next fight.

“Second, it’s not every day that we march out to eliminate a demonic threat and return with a new member of the Order. I want to welcome Ara to our midst. Even though he may have joined us through unpleasant circumstances, I hope that he will soon feel a part of the family that we call the Order of the Vigil. May he realize the importance of our work. It is for the sake of the family you see all around you that we hold our vigil. Now let’s begin.”

The meal passed more quickly than I would have liked. Having eaten my fill, I settled back in my chair and did my best to participate in the conversation after the younger children were carted off to bed by Melody Hartwell. Davin was particularly interested in the recent battle and the tactics used to win the day. His father earned his post as warden by being a brilliant tactician who had gathered decades of experience fighting the Infernal Horde.

“They remained in the rough terrain of the foothills to neutralize the impact of our heavy horses and weaken our formations. That’s why you rarely ever see a large breach down in the plains. They know our advantages and avoid them,” said Warden Hartwell. “And we know their weaknesses and target them. The King’s Realm Guard won the day by attacking deep and taking out the Hell-knights.”

Vigil Snow, on the other hand, took a long strategic view of things. While the warden had built up decades of tactical knowledge, the demons had millennia of understanding our tactics and our ability to counteract their incursions. The Order of the Vigil did its best to capture accurate histories and battle logs to improve their training of future generations in the art of Infernal warfare. Still, the resources needed to do this were immense.

“We are losing the long war,” said Snow. “We can detect and defend against the larger incursions due to our greater numbers and the relatively long time it takes for a Horde to cross over and form up. Still, the growth of devil-ridden heretics in the East and South is bringing more crossings to those regions, and we have little in the way of reserves. We don’t even have a presence anymore in Maidenhall, leaving things completely up to the Kingsmen.”

Okay, so he knows how to bring down a party.

Quickly changing the subject, Rebecca Snow suggested that Lynda show me around town sometime and maybe help me pick up some new clothes.

She poked her husband, "He isn't always required to look like he's on duty."

I sensed that I already had an ally or two here and gladly accepted the help. Excusing myself before I got too comfortable, I asked Sentinel Glenn if he would mind pointing me in the direction of the Vigil scouts. It was full night now, and I felt like getting some fresh air. Glenn was happy to guide me as it gave him a chance to fill me in on the formal roles and ranks of the Order of the Vigil.

All sentinels of the Order began as recruits. After a full year of training, recruits graduated to the position of sentinel-adept. While adepts were considered sentinels, they were ranked below the full-blooded sentinels. A man would advance from adept to full sentinel upon killing his first demon in combat. This act could happen in a battle or a single demon encounter. All claims of demon kills were reviewed by an inquisitor of the Order and validated by a Vigil.

Promotions from the rank of full sentinel were to sentinel-sergeant, sentinel-captain, and finally warden. Paladin, while nominally equivalent to a sentinel-captain in rank, was a position of honor, not command, given to the stoutest and most heroic of sentinels. Those selected for the Brotherhood of Paladins had at least a dozen lesser demons to their credit or a single-handed killing of a greater demon, such as the Hell-knights commanding the Horde northeast of Lockrun. Paladins were the most powerful and substantially armored shock troops of the Order and were often placed in the center of the sentinel line of battle. Scouts were full sentinels with the best night vision, independence, and mobility. They were the tactical eyes and ears of the Order, and they could work effectively alone or in minimal numbers.

Inquisitors, on the other hand, were pulled from the various agents of the Order that provided a variety of specialized, non-martial functions. Inquisitors tended to have exceptional intellect, insight, and observation skills. They also exhibited certain esoteric skills, *clear sight* being the main one, and had to have gained the full trust of a Vigil.

Arriving at the North Tower, Captain Glenn introduced me to Sentinel-Sergeant Corbin, commander of the Berykholt scouts. Their patrols ran in shifts, day and night, around Berykholt and the mountains to the north. This scouting was especially crucial when Vigil Snow was absent. Now that he had returned, the scout group was able to focus on finding and tracking the smaller threats in the area.

The scouts bunked in the North Tower and were composed of a dozen hardened sentinels beside Sergeant Corbin. They wore dark gray tunics over leather armor. Much like the Paladins, the scouts were an elite group. Only the toughest sentinels were invited to join, each with multiple demon kills and a stout attitude to their name before even being considered. The sentinel-scouts wore a black half-moon emblem affixed above their left breast to signify their penchant for working at night while the rest of the Order was sleeping. Their right breast still carried the Order emblem of an eye within the sun.

Sergeant Corbin and Captain Glenn seemed to have a comfortable veterans' rapport. Being just shy of my eighteenth birthday, I got a few funny looks as I was introduced as a 'master tracker' with a recommendation straight from Snow to work with the scouts. Glenn made it clear that even though I was young, Vigil Snow wanted me to gain some experience with the scouts, and luckily that was that.

I had friends in high places as well as dark taverns.

Corbin handed me off to his second, Sentinel Dan Jacka, for a briefing on scout routines, weapons, and tactics.

Jacka was a bit twitchy but knew his business as he gave me the rundown, "The scouts here are organized into six squads. Each day, two squads split the daylight shift, and two split the more dangerous night shift. The other two squads get a rest. Fast horses are used during the day to cover the most ground while the night shifts patrol on foot. To improve mobility and minimize noise, we wear leather over chain armor instead of the heavier chain or plate. The Order's light axes are our primary weapon. Any questions so far?"

It all made sense to me.

"Can you set me up with some leather armor? Perhaps something that will fit over the chainmail and heavy vambrace in my current kit? I'm new to the area, and I prefer to work nights. It would be great if

someone could give me the full tour tonight. After that, I'm glad to spell anyone who needs it or go out alone."

"Nobody here goes out alone," Jacka stated. "I'll take you out with the second shift once our first night shift returns. Having another set of eyes is always a good thing. We have passes to watch and caves to check. Our primary mission is to keep any demons from getting into Berykholt town or slipping further down the valley and into the heartland beyond."

"You have much activity around here?" I asked, thinking of Lockrun and its usually safe, quiet countryside.

"We haven't seen an organized horde in years, but there are plenty of good reasons why the Vigil of the North is located up here in these foothills. The local caves are known to spit out demons during the warmer months, and a single rogue is too many. This close to the mountains, we also encounter all sorts of friendly wolves, lions, and bears, as well as the occasional but deadly, dark elf."

"Understood," I replied. "Finding demons is my specialty."

Or was it them finding me?

"Great. Get yourself kitted out and meet me back here in an hour. I'll have some decent leathers for you by then."

Bar Sinister

Distractions

I offered the newcomer a smile. “This is my exile, Sister, so have a seat and keep your growling to a minimum.”

Exile was undoubtedly looking up.

A sultry black shape walked with the gravity of a black hole through Bar Sinister. Black leather wrapped an Infernal body that painfully reminded me of just how deprived I’d been sitting here next to Memet. Her dark complexion was offset by eyes the color of fire, her lips dark, the color of fresh blood. Her smile was furtive and distracting as Hell.

“I wouldn’t taunt her, Younger. You know who that is, don’t you?”

I replied, “Of course, I do. Why do you think I’m still gripping my sword?”

Chapter 7

Demon Hunting Party

The early summer night started perfectly. The clear weather, high moon, and cool breeze flowing down from the mountains offered the perfect conditions. My chainmail was covered with a thick layer of dark leather, the sleeves cut short, making room for my steel vambraces and leather wraps. An axe was strapped across my back with my fang-dagger secured below it.

We slipped out of Berykholt via a small gate from the north tower around midnight as the earlier night patrol was returning. They had run a loop up through the Everest Gap, as the nearby mountain pass was known, and then searched westward before turning back. Their fifteen-mile excursion had come up empty of any sightings, and it seemed like we were in for a quiet night.

Jacka took the lead and gave me a rundown of the area that we would be covering. After clearing the Gap, which was located just a mile north of our valley, we would be encountering rough vertical terrain. It forced us to turn either east or west to get around Adam's Peak, which was positioned directly north of the Everest Gap. We would take the route eastward, chasing game trails for signs of predators and caves, following a counterclockwise route for the night's patrol.

Besides Dan Jacka, Sentinel-Scout Pika Havens was our third. He was a smaller man of about thirty years with a hunter's eyesight and attitude. I liked him immediately. We traded stories of our favorite kills to pass the time as we hiked into the mountain pass. Adam's Peak wasn't so much a peak as a tall cliff, and I wouldn't expect anything but

mountain goats to call it home. As far as I could tell, the area around us lacked any serious predators.

We hiked a few miles eastward and turned to the northeast through another small valley. I could feel the anxiety of the men ramp up, though my senses were telling me that we were safe from anything predatory or dark.

As we trekked further, I noticed the dull scent of a not too recent kill. I tried to put things mildly, "Sentinel Jacka, what can you tell me about this place? I mean, there's an air of violence here."

Jacka looked at Pika Havens before answering, "We lost a scout patrol here a couple of weeks ago. Both sentinels, Drake and Dillon, were torn to pieces and scattered about a quarter-mile ahead, near that huge flat boulder. Drake was Corbin's second at the time. Somehow, they had been cut off and ambushed, but by what we don't yet know. Too many caves around this area that could hold just about anything."

"Could I take a look at where you found them?"

"Sure, though I doubt you'll find anything new. Especially not while it's dark."

We approached and circled the kill-site. There was the scent of widely scattered human blood and a mixture of other scents, mostly animals, but also traces of something unnaturally rotten.

"Mostly human blood here. The men had their backs to the massive boulder. It seems like they were overwhelmed by a much larger group of demons," I offered. "They didn't have a chance to kill any of their attackers."

Not wanting to consider the full implications of that, Jacka ordered, "Let's get moving. This area seems clear, and I want to pull a full circle around Adam's Peak before the break of dawn."

We picked up the pace pushing another couple miles straight north. As we were turning westward to circle back around Adam's Peak, my senses picked up something that wasn't there a minute ago. Something dark, maybe a mile away, was moving rapidly in our direction. A tang of blood rode in on the north breeze.

I stopped the sentinels. "Are there any caves nearby? I think we may have found some rogue hunters." I pointed up the rough slope

and touched my nose.

Jacka whispered, "How many?"

"Hard to tell. Maybe a half dozen. Dark, loud, certainly demonic. Moving generally in our direction less than a mile to the northwest."

That hit both men hard. One moment, we were enjoying a quiet patrol, and the next, we've got serious trouble on our hands. They recovered quickly knowing our options were few.

"Let's hunt," whispered Pika. "Time to show us what you've got, Ara."

I could see the smaller man's grin in the bright moonlight, barely masking his fear.

I reached for my axe. "Sure thing. I've got my first training session tomorrow morning with the sentinel recruits, and I don't want to be late."

A couple of double-takes were thrown my way. I just smiled and shrugged. *I guess I am a bit evil.*

Jacka was backpedaling. "We can skirt back toward Drake's rock, maybe lose them or string them out. Corbin is gonna have my ass if anything happens to you, Ara, and taking on six demons at once is suicide."

A fresh breeze hit us, and suddenly, I knew what we had to do.

I growled to the scouts as I bolted up the slope, "It's time to see who's the bigger monster on this mountain."

They had no choice but to follow.

Our going was slow at first, and I started to veer to the left, aiming to get ahead of the oncoming group.

The picture in my mind was growing clearer. There were eight lesser demons, not six, chasing a ninth, heading southwest. It was this ninth that was my target. It was wounded, young, and female. Visions of Cat ran through my head, and I pulled ahead of the other two scouts. Drawing closer, I could smell the pain of exhaustion, muscles cramping, and deterioration that was common to all prey at the end of their final run.

The scent of their quarry's failing blood had pushed the demonic pursuit into a frenzy. The demons' stench and their rage filled the air around me. Their grunts and growls stoked fear in their victim, now

only ten yards ahead of the predators as she continued her tortured run across the mountainside. The girl appeared human but slightly different, exotic.

The rogues, a twisted menagerie of fiends, were strung out in a line. They completely ignored me as I closed in rapidly on their left.

Pushing myself, I leaped at the lead demon, a stout beast, part man, part bull, with long horns, claws, and vicious-looking teeth. I brought my axe in hard to the back of its neck. It was a perfect strike, shearing off the beast's head and filling the night with the alien scent of sudden death.

My momentum carried me forward across the line of chasing demons, and I succeeded in pulling the other monsters away from their night's quarry as they turned to focus on me.

The second Hellion in the line, an ugly man-crab variety, veered my way with its oversized pincer claws.

I spun with a forceful backhand swing of my axe.

One claw-shaped arm went flying away as it diverted my killing blow.

I followed up with my left arm smashing into its small, ugly face and heard the crunch of shattering bone. I hoped that was the sound of its skull breaking and not my arm.

It staggered and toppled sideways just as demons three and four were lunging at me, angling in from both left and right. I'd taken too long with demon number two and lost the initiative.

I threw my axe into the body of the nearest—a wolf-man full of claws and teeth—hoping to slow it down before the other beast could close and disarming myself in the process.

It was time to see if Sentinel Glenn was right about my fang. I drew the exotic dagger and readied myself.

The fourth, a goat-faced Hellion, charged forward in a rage, its head down and its twisted horns leveled at my gut.

Dodging left, I avoided the collision and countered with an overhand strike, bringing the fang down hard.

Demons are built of sterner stuff, but the tooth punched right through the back of its head like a burning knife through water. I say 'burning' because acrid smoke poured from the hole in the beast's

head as it slammed face-first into the ground.

Energy and anger filled me, and I roared in defiance of the night.

The remaining demons staggered to a halt, racked by confusion and fear.

I spun back, putting the injured wolf-man down with two sharp stabs to its skull.

Its sharp claws raked my chest as it fell, but the underlying chain-mail armor held firm.

Four down, four to go.

I wore the blood of their newly dead brethren and wielded the fang of a devious killer. Sensing the growing panic of the last four demons, I charged into their midst.

Jacka and Havens arrived, hitting our foe from behind. Their sentinel axes set upon the last two Hellions in the line while my fang punched another madly growling wolf-man between its red glowing eyes. It toppled backward to the ground, leaving us one hissing final fiend.

The last demon, a tall, jagged mantis-shaped creature, fought wildly, jumping and slashing hard at my eyes, trying to use its claws and extended reach to hold me back. I could sense when its need to flee finally took hold, and I moved further left to cut it off.

A figure in black raced in from behind it, and a black blade slashed across the demon's narrow legs, severing vital joints.

I hopped back as the lesser demon tumbled to the ground, thrashing at our feet. Moments later, it lost both arms, and then its head, and I stood face to face with its bane.

The girl before me held a wicked-looking sword, exotic and black, with a slight angle to its blade. Her black leather armor had been slashed open in several places, and blood dripped down her arms. There was an emptiness inside her, almost like death.

She seemed surprised as I sheathed my blade, and I stepped farther back to give her room. Being completely drained, both physically and emotionally, she had fought back and was looking for more.

Jacka and Havens approached from the left, and I waved at them to hold off.

"Who are you?" I said.

She swayed, whispering a sad reply, "You are not my sister," and then she collapsed.

The hillside was suddenly still.

Jacka grabbed me and looked me over for wounds. My leather armor was covered in blood and shredded across my chest, but the chainmail beneath had done its job. My thick vambrace was dented, and my left arm ached. We were all wearing plenty of blood, but none of it seemed to be ours.

Havens went about checking the demons while Jacka and I examined the girl. She was unconscious, her breathing weak. The wounds that Jacka could see didn't look too life-threatening. The ones I could sense were another story. I gathered up her sword and looped her sheath across my back. It was heavier than I expected.

"She's not fully human," Jacka said. "Looks like a dark elf, but her ears aren't sharp enough, and she's built more like a human. She must be a half-breed and an outcast. The perfect target for a hunting party of demons in these mountains. We're days from Bastian. It's amazing that she survived this far."

At that moment, Havens approached, a sad look in his tired eyes. He returned my axe, and he handed Jacka a gold coin.

"I found that on the leader of the bunch," said Pika. "I'd know it anywhere. It was Drake's lucky coin. He never went out on patrol without it."

The realization of what we had done on that perfect summer night struck Jacka. We'd avenged the sentinel's earlier tragic loss and taken down an incredibly dangerous threat to the area.

Jacka turned to me, "Ara, how did you know that they were there? We can barely see them moving fifty yards away in the dark, and yet you noticed them almost a mile away."

"They were loud," was all I would say. The beasts were raging loud. I pointed to the girl. "Help me carry her. We won't leave her out here for the wolves."

We reversed our path, returning past Drake's Rock in hopes of avoiding another fight. We wanted to get the injured girl to a doctor as soon as possible. Havens carried a small pouch full of rotting demon

ears as proof of our success. It turns out the Vigil pays a hefty reward for each demon slain. We took turns carrying the girl, and in our worn state, we made slow but steady progress.

A pair of mounted scouts working the first day shift found us as we were trudging south through the Gap. We handed them the injured girl and sent them riding ahead to the castle. Jacka had given them a few quiet words and flashed them the gold coin. That was all they needed to make haste homeward.

The sun was well up by the time we reached the Berykholt castle gates, and I could hear the raucous sounds of training in the distance. We were met by Captain Glenn, Sergeant Corbin, and Warden Hartwell himself. I waited for Jacka to report. It was his patrol, and we were late in returning.

Jacka spoke in a tired voice, "Eight, Sergeant." His voice shook. "And this." He handed over Drake's coin.

Drake had been Corbin's second and his best friend in the Order. They had begun their Order careers as recruits together fifteen years before. It was easy to track all the emotions that ran across the sergeant's face as he stared at the coin. Anyone could have sensed them from a mile or more.

After a long pause, Havens stepped in, "We traded them some sentinel steel for it." Havens handed Corbin the pouch full of ears. "Jacka and I each slew one. Ara killed five on his own."

A firm slap on the back greeted me. "Ara, you're late for your first recruit training session this morning," said Glenn.

"Don't I know it, Captain. Nobody warned me where a bit of carousing with these two scouts would end up. Say, Doctor Loeb wouldn't happen to be busy right now, would he?"

Glenn offered a knowing smile. "As a matter of fact, he has a patient under his care in our keep. The dawn shift patrol carried in a victim of a demon attack this morning. Why do you ask?"

"She killed the eighth. I'd like to go check on her, if I may."

"Sure thing," he said. "Have Doctor Loeb examine you as well. Just make sure to catch up with all of us later this morning and see Vigil Snow. He'll want to speak with you about the encounter."

I waved to Jacka and Havens and headed off to the keep, hoping to

find another survivor of my first scout patrol.

Bar Sinister

Cycle of Unreality

“Lis-Xiana, that bitch. She takes the meaning of exile to a whole new level of Hell.”

On my left sat *Rei-Seeck*. She still hadn’t said a single word to anyone in the place. She was working on a savory Demon Mule cocktail that I had placed before her.

Always start the night with a kick.

From my right, Memet spoke into the gloom of his nearly empty glass, “How *Rei-Seeck* came to dwell in our Cimmerian desert dive is still to be discerned. The rumors of the Cycle outrun me.”

“But why worry? Death has already arrived,” I pointed out the obvious.

“Certainly, but who will she take when she leaves?” said Memet.

“Leave? She just got here. And the Cycle is young. Let’s have another round.”

Chapter 8

Blood-strewn

Barely stepping inside the keep, I ran into Lynda Snow as she was coming downstairs for breakfast. She froze, noting my ugly, blood-strewn appearance or perhaps the wretched smell. The blood wasn't mine, but possession is nine-tenths of the law. I winced at her shock and her loss of appetite.

"Ara, what happened to you? Are you alright?"

I had a feeling her father rarely returned home wearing his work. "Lynda, sorry. I'm alright, mostly. I just got back from a night patrol with the scouts. It began quietly and ended with quite a fight. I'd better get cleaned up." I ducked my head. I remembered how fine she looked the night before at dinner, and here I stood, ruining her breakfast.

Lynda recovered quickly and changed the subject to something lighter, "Maybe we could head into town together later this week?"

"You bet. It looks like I could use some new clothes," I replied, running up the stairs.

Reaching my shared living room, I saw Doctor Loeb coming out of one of the extra bedrooms with a pair of young women that were dressed in gray like sentinel recruits.

He gave me the once over and checked my left arm for any damage. I had a nice dent in my left vambrace. My forearm was black and blue. Loeb didn't think that the bone was broken again, but it was starting to feel like it. He suggested that I use my old sling to take some of the weight off the arm.

Loeb introduced me to his young recruits. Their names were Helen and Drew, and they were both in their late teens. They were assisting

the doctor as part of their medical training. They helped me shed the rest of my armor while I quizzed Loeb.

“Doctor, how is the girl? Did she wake up?”

“She awoke quite agitated. After calming her down, I gave her something to help her sleep. She’s lost some blood, but of more concern, she appears to be utterly exhausted. She must have been on the run for quite some time. She’s a half-breed dark elf. Rare. I only know of one other. Dark elves are not a race to suffer impurities.”

“Did you find out her name?” I asked.

“Her name is Raven. She seems to be about your age, though in her condition, it’s tough to be sure. Helen and Drew are here for the important task of watching over her day and night. Get yourself cleaned up and dressed. We will let you know if anything changes.”

“Doctor, you need to know that she killed one of the demons before she collapsed, took it clean apart with this black blade of hers. That puts her on our side.” I wanted to make sure he knew that she was a priority to me.

Hesitating a moment, Loeb gave me a nod. “Go get cleaned up and see to your armor. We’ll have plenty to discuss later with Vigil Snow.”

After getting a bath and a fresh set of clothes, I looked in on Raven. She was still asleep, but I felt reassured, seeing Helen sitting at her side. I asked about the woman’s wounds. They weren’t viewed as life-threatening but had required some stitching by Doctor Loeb. I asked her to let me know as soon as anything changed.

I hit up the kitchen for a late breakfast and made a short visit to the armorer to knock out the dent in my vambrace.

The sentinel armorer was the same one that had kitted me out back in Lockrun, a man by the name of Nickols. He recognized the thick vambrace and asked what caused the dent. When I told him that it was a demon’s nose, he laughed before he realized that I was serious. Nickols pounded out the dent and handed it back as good as new. He promised to find something a bit sturdier now that he realized I would be using it as a weapon and not just a brace.

I had a long list of visits to make, starting with the scouts in the North Tower. Upon reaching the tower’s second floor, I found four scouts scattered around the common room working on their armor.

Sentinel Pika Havens was snoring heavily in the corner. It must have been a rough night.

“Excuse me, is Sentinel Corbin still up?” I addressed the nearest man.

His bright gray eyes placed him in his early thirties, while the marble gray beard and bald head made him look at least ten years older. He had to be on one of the day shift patrols, getting ready to roll out in the afternoon.

“And who might you be, recruit? Don’t you have some training to attend?” He played the role of an old-timer to perfection.

These men had much to be proud of in their commitment and work against a dangerous enemy. It was that same pride that led them out of the castle each day on patrol. I wasn’t about to argue with his assessment. Heck, he was right about my training.

“I do, Sentinel, but Captain Glenn excused me from recruit training this morning to take care of some other business.”

I wasn’t going to give him a nail on which to hang me but hoped the captain’s name would speed things up a bit.

“Sergeant Corbin is up on the third floor, but he’s busy with his second. Why don’t you come back later, lad, once you’ve completed your training and gained a few scars.”

I had a feeling this sort of conversation wouldn’t be my last with the veteran sentinels.

The four sentinels had paused in their work, chuckling, and waiting for me to bugger off. The snoring in the corner had stopped. I felt a rising wave of anger coming from that direction.

“Sentinel, I’d love to show you my scars, but Vigil Snow has told me to keep my shirt on. Plus, I don’t even know your name,” I said, mock fanning myself with my right hand.

Havens spoke, “Ara, his name is Duncan, and he’s Corbin’s Third, leader of the day patrols. If he had a lick of sense, he’d send you on your way upstairs so I could get some sleep.”

Duncan and the rest of his crew were dead silent as I left on my way to the third floor. It seemed like they might have heard my name before.

I was met with a warm greeting from Corbin and Jacka. The whole

scout cadre had already been briefed on the details of last night. That might have explained the high-strung attitudes from the group below and their stunned silence as they realized who I was.

“Anything you need from me, Sergeant?”

“Ara, I was just going to ask you the same.”

“Well, I could use a new set of leathers and perhaps a formal introduction to the rest of your cohort.”

“Certainly, I’ll supply both before you leave here this morning. I’ve seen to it that the warden will be rewarding you for your five kills. They’re already confirmed and in the Order’s books. We don’t do this for the money, Ara, but we take the rewards with the risk. The Crown knows the value of our work and provides for us well.”

“Thank you. Will Sentinel Jacka be heading out tonight?” I asked, eager to accompany him again.

“No, I’m giving the night shifts a break. I think a bit of drinking and celebration is in order. One more thing, Ara,” Corbin reached into his pocket and handed me a small black half-moon pin. “This is for you. Wear it proudly above your left breast as a member of the vaunted scouts and don’t let any sentinel give you a hard time.”

I finished up the morning with the scouts by getting introduced to the rest of their dozen members, including Sentinel-scout Mott Duncan. Things went much better the second time around. Rewards aside, killing five Hellions at once certainly buys a lot of respect.

I headed back to the Vigil’s Keep, hoping to track down Vigil Snow, and found him up in his living room, enjoying some free time with his daughters.

“Please excuse my intrusion, Vigil.”

“Come on in, Ara. We’ve been expecting you. I spoke with Captain Glenn and Doctor Loeb earlier. You’ve only been here for two days and are already making your mark.” Snow eyed my new half-moon insignia. “And making friends in the scouts.”

After sending his daughters out to find Warden Hartwell, Snow quizzed me further about the events of the previous night. He was surprised at the number of demons encountered. It was a full hunting party, not a band of stragglers. It was evident that they were using the caves to mask their presence and having some success at ambushing

their victims. There was great concern that even more significant numbers could be hiding underground nearby.

"We wiped them all out, no survivors, and left the bodies to rot, so I'm hoping that will give the fiends notice that this area is off-limits," I said. "Which brings me to my next topic. I was hoping to get your view on the matter, um, as it relates to the girl we rescued."

"You can confirm she fought and killed the last demon?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yes, I can confirm it. We all saw it. She was quite capable with that blade of hers, even in her vastly weakened condition," I replied.

"Good to know. If the girl recovers, she might have a future with us," said Snow.

"I'm concerned about her future and her well-being. I don't want a repeat of how I was treated in Lockrun. That won't be allowed." This last remark may have come out a bit too forcefully.

"I see," said Snow, taking note of the ice in my voice.

With his *clear sight*, he had to see the truth in my words. I wasn't bluffing.

"Lord Snow, the girl is my responsibility, at least until she recovers and can make her own choices, and even then, she won't be claimed by the Order as I was."

At that moment, Lynda arrived with Warden Hartwell, and the topic quickly changed to the tactics and decisions of the past night. Lynda stayed to listen in, her curiosity getting the better of her.

Hartwell began his own line of questioning, "Our standing mode of operation is never to engage a larger demonic force. While our sentinels are well trained, they are too easily overwhelmed by the demons' speed and ferocity. The scouts know this. Being outnumbered, what led you to attack the hunting party in the middle of the night across broken ground?"

"The decision was simple: to protect the girl, without hesitation," I answered. "If I had waited or been more cautious in my approach, she would have been caught and butchered. Sensing that the demons were entirely focused on their failing prey, I expected to flank them, and with enough surprise, even up the odds before they knew what had hit them."

“Once we had engaged, my biggest concern was making sure that none escaped. I didn’t want any word getting back to potential reinforcements in the area.”

Hartwell continued his grilling of me, “And you committed my scouts with what you perceived of the situation from almost a mile away?”

Here Vigil Snow cut in, “Warden, I’m not surprised. You know his story and his success with the *Kjaira* back at Lockrun. Besides, a pack of lesser demons would be an easier challenge given the circumstances that he already spelled out. And he had the right.”

And here, Warden Hartwell nodded, finally accepting my actions and explanation for the night patrol’s engagement.

“One last question,” he said. “How old are you, Ara?”

“I’ll be eighteen with the new moon, Sir.” I stood up. “Warden, please know that I do not intend to rewrite sentinel tactical doctrine. My entire plan for the moment is to get some lunch and some sleep and hopefully make it to my recruit training session tomorrow, if I may.”

Lynda stood to walk out with me. I could feel her working hard to contain her fear at the ugly event we had just discussed. Her face had gone pale with the effort.

“That girl,” she said, “She was out there all alone in the mountains at night? With a pack of demons chasing her down?”

I nodded. “I know it sounds crazy, but I’ve got a feeling that her situation was far worse than that.”

Chapter 9

Survivors in Exile

After joining me for lunch, Lynda Snow offered to show me into Berykholt town for some new clothes. I was looking forward to a nap in the afternoon but took her up on the offer. I had a few personal things to buy, and with the significant bounty money provided by the Order, I wouldn't need to wait.

Before heading out, I went upstairs to check on Raven. According to Doctor Loeb's assistant, Drew, Raven was stirring a bit but still sleeping. I asked Drew to take some measurements of Raven and write them down for me. I was heading to a tailor and could help her out.

Berykholt was a larger city than Lockrun, spanning the valley mostly south of the castle. It boasted almost five thousand citizens and soldiers and offered plenty of shops from which to choose.

Our first stop was a leather-works called The Whip, where I bought a new over-the-shoulder belt and sheath for Raven's black blade and a backpack for me to use on future patrols. I also bought a new leather brace for my left arm, something sturdier and better fitting than what was cobbled together in Lockrun. We waited while they fit it to my arm and laced on the straps that would help hold it and my heavy steel vambrace tightly in place. My new bruises still ached.

Lynda got a good look at the gruesomeness defining my left arm. "Ara, who did that to you?"

"I can show you if you really want to know." I blushed at the look of pity and fear in her pretty green eyes. I wasn't sure this was a good idea, but I didn't have any friends at the moment, at least not any

within a couple of weeks travel, and Lynda sure seemed like a good start. Reaching behind my back, I pulled out my war knife, fang and all, saying "This."

She winced as I showed off the six-inch fang but was undeterred. "Is that what you fought last night?"

"No, no, the demons last night were kittens compared to the beast that wielded these." I spun the fang-dagger in my palm. "The *Kjaira* demon was stronger, faster, and impervious to pain. It almost killed me. I hope I never meet another like it."

Next, we went to a popular tailor shop that Lynda recommended. On the way, we ran into a couple of young sentinels, apparently friends of Lynda.

"So, Lynda, who's your new friend? Seems a bit young, don't ya think?" said one, offering me an envious look.

Luckily, Lynda wasn't having any of it. "This is Ara. My father recruited him last month in Lockrun. He's only just arrived, and we're getting him kitted out for life in the grand city of Berykholt." After a short pause, she continued, "Ara, this is Keil Martell and his brother Sevin. Both are newly minted sentinel-adepts from the spring recruit company."

Keil, the older of the two, was around nineteen or twenty, with sandy blonde hair and a smile that spoke a bit too loudly about his interest in Lynda. We were about the same size, and I could sense the overconfidence and innocence of the young sentinel-adept. In some ways, we were a lot alike. Sevin, his dark-haired younger brother, was slightly taller and visibly the stronger of the two. He was also a quiet one, offering me a nod and a quick handshake. I could see his eyes react to the black half-moon sigil on my breast.

Keil, on the other hand, was quicker with his mouth, and his eyes never strayed long from Lynda Snow. "Well, when you're done looking after young Ara, I would be glad to escort you out and about tonight."

"Oh, I don't know, Keil. Ara might need more looking after this evening. I'll let you know." She smiled and looped her arm through mine.

I was so not getting off on the right foot with these fellows, but I didn't mind one bit.

Keil frowned as Sevin pulled him away down the street in the opposite direction. Lynda, on the other hand, was quickly winning my favor. Her winning smile and the way she held my arm gave me a sense of warmth that I had never experienced before.

I chuckled, "You'd make a great diplomat, I mean the way you handled Keil there."

Lynda blushed. "You haven't met my brother yet. Someday, I hope to match his proficiency in managing the demands of others."

At the tailor shop, a place simply called The Needles, Lynda helped me pick out several sets of well-made shirts and riding pants, as well as a sharp road jacket that would suit for when I was off duty. The tailor wanted me to try on the shirts and pants in case they needed to be altered. I waved off the suggestion, trusting his eye for sizing and not wanting to remove my shirt in front of anyone, especially Lynda.

She chuckled at my modesty, saying, "I don't bite, you know."

She certainly had the uncanny ability to make me blush at a drop of a hat. I had only just met her the day before, and she had already seen enough of my scars.

Half in jest, I replied, "Well, your father hasn't given me permission to take off my shirt."

That seemed to set her back for a moment, and she gave me an uncertain smile. Okay, my social skills needed some work, but what was I going to say?

Finally, I handed the tailor the measurements that Drew had made of Raven while she slept. I asked if he could provide a set of comfortable and durable clothes fit for a young woman. I could only guess what Raven might like based on her earlier appearance. The tailor suggested a cream-colored shirt and black riding pants, assuring me that they could alter anything that didn't fit well.

It was late afternoon when we finally returned to the keep, and I was ready for a long nap and a quiet night. I dropped off everything in my room and went to check on Raven. She was gone. So were Helen and Drew. Filled with worry, I ran down to the kitchen and dining room to see if they had gone to eat. Both rooms were empty.

My stomach was turning into knots, and I began counting to myself to calm and think. I couldn't see them removing Raven from the keep,

so I ran up to the third floor, Vigil Snow's floor. There was a crowd present in his modest meeting room.

I stormed in. "Where is she?"

I could feel her here among Vigil Snow and his men. And family? I saw Lynda with Meryna on the far side of the room, looking confused by the scene. Vigil Snow was facing Raven, who was struggling as she was being held by Sentinels Glenn and Barnes. Suddenly, I froze, locked in place. Feth, Doctor Loeb was here too.

I started to count in my head again, needing to regain some control, some composure. Anger flared in my heart now, and matching it to my intention, on a count of eight, I reached around behind my back and drew my war knife.

Loeb yelled out, "Ara, please hold! This isn't what it seems."

The rest of the room seemed to freeze at that warning shout, and I stepped intently toward Raven. She was dressed in an oversized sentinel recruit shirt. Barefoot as she was, she stood maybe five and a half feet tall, about six inches shorter than me. She was weak, weakening further. Whatever was happening here, it wasn't right.

"Let her go now," I spoke as calmly and quietly as possible, stepping forward between Snow and Raven. I turned to face her and her captors. "Raven, do you remember me? Do you remember last night?"

She stopped struggling and looked at me. She looked at my dagger. I held it out to her. Glenn looked at me like I was insane.

"You smell familiar." She was shaking slightly now, ready to collapse again. I sheathed my weapon.

"Captain Glenn, please release her," I said.

Snow must have nodded because Glenn and his second let go and quickly backed away. I spotted Loeb and shook my head in his direction. Though glowing with anger, I was starting to level with the situation.

"Vigil, why is she here? Have you done anything to her?"

Snow maintained his usual calm demeanor. "Ara, we haven't made any claims, if that is what you are asking."

I moved closer to Raven and slowly reached out my hand. "Raven, I'm Ara. We met last night when we killed the demons that were

hunting you. The demons are dead, and you are safe here, under my protection. Nobody here will hurt you or even lay a hand on you without my permission. Do you understand?" I spoke to Raven and the room at large.

Eventually, she nodded in response, looking confused by the crowd around us.

"Please give me your hand. I'll help you back to your bedroom. You need to rest and regain your strength."

She hesitated before reaching out. "Where am I?"

"You're in the castle in the city of Berykholt, south of the Everest Mountains. You're among the Order of the Vigil in Colivar. Where did you come from?"

"The City of Bastian, in the mountains to the north," she answered.

I began walking Raven over to the door for the stairwell.

"Lynda, would you please help me here? I'd like you to meet Raven and help us walk back downstairs to her room. I have some things that I'd like to give her."

We placed Raven back in her bed. It was painful to see her body so stiff and her muscles so weakened from her ordeal. She wouldn't be a threat to anyone anytime soon. I'd had to fight the urge to carry her down the stairs, wanting her to take a few slow steps on her own.

"Raven, this is Lynda, daughter to Lord Snow. I believe you've already met Helen and Drew, waiting over by the door. They're here to help you, so please let them know if you need anything. I'll be right back; my room is next door."

I quickly recovered today's finds from my room and presented them to Raven. First, I handed over the black blade in its new sheath. If she were anything like me, I knew that would do the most to ease her anxiety. I was right, and for the first time ever, I saw her smile.

"Thank you for returning *Talon*. I feared that I had lost it. It belonged to my father and was given to me upon my exile from the kingdom."

I didn't know what to say to that, but I felt a deep sense of sympathy at the word 'exile.'

"Raven, your old sheath was torn up, so I replaced it with one that you can wear over your back. It won't be in your way when you don't need it. I also brought you some real clothes just in case you want to

take another stroll outside this room.” I turned to Helen and Drew. “In the meantime, would you please bring up some dinner for Raven.”

Taking a seat in the chair next to the bed, I propped my feet up on a nearby stool, crossed my arms, and decided to rest my eyes for a few minutes until dinner arrived.

Chapter 10

Paying Attention

In the still-dark hours of early morning, I awoke back in my bed. I had slept better last night than I had in months. Shaking off the new thoughts and emotions of the past couple of days, I checked in next door before getting myself cleaned up. Raven was sound asleep. Helen had drawn the night shift and dozed in a small cot by the bed.

After washing and kitting up, I went down to the kitchen, hoping it was already open. I needed to fill up before I attended a long morning of recruit training. Sure enough, the dining room was serving, and I wasn't alone. Vigil Snow was already breaking his fast with hot coffee and smoked meats on fresh bread. I sat down across from him, knowing that we had plenty to discuss but letting him choose where to begin.

"Good morning, Ara. Glad to see you're up. How is our half-elf guest this morning?"

"Resting well. She's healing, and I hope that she'll be up and about in a few more days. Did you want to talk about yesterday?"

"Ara, you are young, strong, and fearless, but my biggest concern for you has been your independence. A Vigil must draw upon those around him for the strength and skills that he lacks. He must form bonds with his people that last a lifetime, for we are in a fight that never ends. There is a shared devotion in the Order, especially around a Vigil, that carries us forward. It has been an honor to watch you find yourself and begin to find your place among us."

"I was concerned that I might have overstepped yesterday."

"Many in the room were sweating the outcome, but you were quite

clear and correct in your actions. You were well within your rights and abilities to step in and protect the girl,” Snow replied. “My only concern now is the arrival of Vigil Thorn and how she will react to you and the situation, but let’s leave that for a future discussion. Today, I have but one request.”

“And what is that, Lord Snow?”

“You will be attending sentinel recruit training on the west training field this morning under the tutelage of Adept-Sergeant Masterson. He’s a bit rough around the edges. Please don’t damage him.” Snow offered a smile as payment for his seemingly simple request.

“And keep my shirt on?” I said.

“Exactly.”

###

Before reaching the west training field an hour after dawn, I stopped by the North Tower. I was in luck this time to find Mott Duncan in the scouts’ common room sorting the day’s patrols.

I stuck with my most respectful tone, “Sentinel-scout Duncan, may I have the honor of accompanying your second shift patrol today? I’ve got training in the morning but would very much like to get a daytime view of the land around Berykholt.”

He fired back, “Ha! Cut with the crap, scout. Once you’re in, you’re in. I’ll be glad to ride out with you this afternoon. Be here after lunch with your horse.”

“Will do. Now I’ve got my first recruit training session with Sergeant Masterson. Vigil Snow made me promise not to hurt him. Any advice?”

Duncan chuckled, “Well then, you are good and truly fethed.”

###

We took the field to the west of Castle Berykholt after a five-mile run in full kit. Including my own, four hundred fresh faces flushed with exertion as we came to rest for inspection.

Four recruit companies covered the open field. Each company consisted of about one hundred recruits, ages eighteen to twenty-two, with the summer company being the most senior in status and due to graduate with the new moon. The autumn company would then be highest ranked, followed by the winter and spring companies. Spring company recruits had only been in training for about two months. Each

company took up a side of the field, and a rather large sentinel-adept ran the inspection, counting heads and organizing lines according to a simple ranking system. The best fighters or alphas in each company were placed front and center.

Not wanting to disrupt the current training regimen, I spied out and approached Sergeant Masterson, who was waiting impatiently in the center of the field. The scouts had filled me in on Masterson. He had the skills and had even graded out as the alpha of his company during training twenty years ago. Unfortunately, he had lost his eye during his first battle against the Horde. It was a rare wound, most being fatal, but he would never have the chance to advance beyond his current station of sentinel-adept. The Vigil placed him where he could be most useful, and he was Hell on earth where recruit training was concerned.

“Sergeant, my name is Ara. Vigil Snow has asked that I train with your recruits.” I hoped the word had been duly passed on.

Masterson wore a black eye patch over his left eye. It only partially covered a set of three scars that ran from forehead to cheek. I had a similar but more substantial set of scars running across my back.

“You seem rather young and oddly dressed for the occasion,” he replied, pointing to the half-moon on my tunic. “And what’s with the vambrace? How will you use a shield with that heavy thing on your arm?”

“I know it’s not doctrine, but it works as a brace for my arm, as well as a shield and a club, depending on my temper,” I answered. “My first encounter with a demon a couple of months ago injured my arm in a bad way. I was hoping you would point out which company and position I should take for today’s training. Captain Glenn has surely informed you of my presence.”

On a small hill overlooking the field, I noticed a group of sentinels, including one with the shiny bald head of Sentinel-scout Duncan, watching the proceedings from a safe distance.

“You know Glenn, do ya?” Masterson replied. “Tell ya what, since you’ve got that moon on your shirt and a small audience up on the hill watching, why don’t you just show us where you belong.”

Turning away from me, he bellowed for one of his training crew, “Tomkins, front and center!”

A rather large sentinel ran up and presented himself, “Yes, Sergeant.”

“Tomkins, who are the best fighters in this current batch of summer recruits? I feel like having a training match this morning.”

“With Gunner laid up, the best in the summer class would be Hicks, and the second would be Griffen.”

“How about a third too?” I asked Tomkins.

“I’d pull in Lucas from the autumn company if that suits the sergeant.”

“Do it,” said Masterson. “Full kits and weapons. None of this wooden club horseshit.”

I asked, “What would you like me to do with them, Sergeant?”

“You’re not here to make friends, son. Just fight them, but please don’t hurt anyone permanently.”

“What happened to Gunner?” I wondered out loud.

“He thought he could take Tomkins. It didn’t work out.”

“Was he wrong?” I said.

“Only on that day.”

Tomkins returned with the alpha recruits and lined them up in front of us for introductions.

I met Brandon Hicks, Jayl Griffen, and Benji Lucas. They were decked out in armor—layers of leather and chain—and heavy axes. The recruit training was more about building strength and endurance than expertise and speed. That didn’t seem fair.

Tomkins ran at least six foot two and had fifty pounds on me. He looked over and asked, “Okay, who do you want to fight first?”

Demons didn’t take turns. They came at you in a heartbeat.

“First? Why not all three at once, and you can hold my axe,” I said, tossing him the weapon.

I was feeling like a challenge and didn’t trust myself to swing a live blade at anyone.

Masterson chuckled, “The boy sure knows how to train now, don’t he? Well, let’s do it then.”

We each took a few steps back. The recruits pulled their shields off of their backs and drew their axes. Hicks was almost my height, around five-eleven, and his armor looked the lightest on him. Griffen

was stockier. He would be slower but harder to put down. Lucas was the tallest and had a long, almost gangly reach. He also had the arms of a woodcutter, and he waved his axe swiftly back and forth in his grip. I was glad that I had handed my axe to Tomkins. I didn't want to damage these fellows. They smelled of confidence and sweat. They were still warm from the early morning run.

Masterson shouted, "Begin!"

I asked the three men, "Anyone here ever seen a demon?"

Before any of them could answer, I bolted right, moving inside Lucas' long reach. My left hand reached across and grabbed his shield, pulling it back hard to my left. That put him wide open to my attack while also getting in the way of the other two opponents. My right arm with its lighter vambrace swung around and caught him on the back of the head.

Lucas staggered forward and dropped.

Griffen hesitated as Lucas hit the ground.

Mistake.

I was already inbound, and I caught his shield with my shoulder before he could react or shift his balance.

Griffen stumbled backward—right into Hicks's path. Hicks was doing his best to avoid the collision with Griffen and wasn't paying attention to me as I stepped around behind him.

Suddenly an axe flashed out behind Hicks, forcing me to duck while Hicks followed it around to face me.

So, he was paying attention, after all.

As Hicks's axe flew over my head, I shifted back left and moved inside his guard. My right vambrace scored a back-handed hit to his temple, and he was down.

Griffen's confidence fled. He had taken a step back instead of counterattacking while I was focused on Brandon Hicks.

Another mistake.

Griffen set his feet, adjusted his balance, and, in expert guard fashion, got ready to block the incoming practice demon.

I smiled and was on him.

His block was robust and would have laid me out cold if I had let it land. Instead, it committed him to move in one direction for the

moment.

I spun to the left and, using my right vambrace, blocked his desperate axe swing before it could gain any momentum. It was enough to push him further off balance and keep him from getting his shield back into position.

A half-step brought me inside his guard, and my left vambrace careened off the side of his head, pitching him onto the ground.

I stepped back and looked at Masterson. The drill-sergeant looked a bit paler than a minute ago.

"You move like a demon, boy. Where'd you learn to fight like that?"

"Just seems to come naturally to me, though I swear I do better against demons. Well, most demons anyway." I tapped my left arm.

Tomkins returned my axe. "Those three would've wiped me easily if I had to go at 'em all at once, axe or no axe."

"Sergeant, you mind if I help with some of the training, especially with your alphas?" I said. "I promised Warden Hartwell that I wouldn't mess with his doctrines on fighting, but I think that you've got some pretty strong fighters here that could use a bit of advanced work."

"You think that those three are strong fighters after that short demonstration?" Masterson didn't try to hide the doubt in his voice.

"Sure," I replied. "Look at Griffen. If he were a sentinel in a shield and axe line, I would have been paste. He has the strength to hold a shield line together. No demon is going to push him back when he's prepared. And Lucas, with those long arms, belongs on a horse. He knows how to move an axe; I just didn't give him a chance.

"And Hicks knows how to fight, knows where to place his attention, and keeps his balance. When I had turned the fight into a two-on-one affair against him for a moment, he counterattacked with a swing that would have taken the head off most demons. I'd be glad to work with him, um, whenever he regains consciousness."

Masterson seemed to consider my suggestion. "Well, Hicks graduates with the new moon. Until then, he's mine."

I saluted and walked off, knowing that was the best offer I'd get.

Chapter 11

Weapon of Kings

Raven sat across the table, her eyes on a bowl of spicy trout soup and dark bread hot from the oven. We were both freshly washed, dressed in new clothes, and doing our best to break the uncomfortable silence.

Raven's appetite wasn't a problem, but with every small bite she took, a wave of grief and sadness crossed her brow. Someone had done their worst to this woman, and I was concerned that her exhausted body couldn't overcome her broken heart.

I had no idea what to say to help her condition, so I started with a simple adage from my younger days, "You can't heal your heart on an empty stomach."

Faster than Brandon Hicks, she snapped back, "And what would you know about my heart?"

No vambrace was quick enough to block that. Even worse, I took it on the chin, knowing she was right. What did I know?

"Nothing—I don't know—I'm sorry," I placed my fork on the table. I didn't even know my own heart. Never had the chance.

Feth.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to sound so angry."

Looking past her overly pale complexion, her down-turned lips, and weakened movements, I searched her eyes until I found a glimpse of the fierce survivor that I met on that dark Everest hillside. "We all do what we must to survive."

She whispered back, sharing her secret, "I don't feel like I survived."

"I know what you mean."

“You do?”

“Before I came here, I was hunted by a demon. I fought it and—”

It had only been a couple months since I'd trapped the beast north of Lockrun. The vivid memory was still fresh in my mind. I hoped to meet Raven there, one survivor to another. A strong connection might help pull her soul back to the side of the living.

“And what?” she said.

I smiled, knowing I wasn't going to give up. “Eat, and I'll tell you.”

After lunch, we walked the castle grounds. I gently coaxed out her story as she coaxed out mine. I didn't want to wear her out, but I was riveted by her tale of sudden exile and fighting her way through the Everest range for the past fortnight. The hellish hunting party had picked up her scent about a week ago, and she had been fighting for her life ever since, with little to no rest, let alone sleep.

She had been able to gain ground during the daylight hours when the demons became more sluggish. Still, they would increase in strength and speed during the night and eventually find her trail. Besides her injuries and fatigue, the exile and the demons had plagued her spirit, and her smile was never more than fleeting.

I told her about my life in Lockrun and how the Vigil had recruited me based on my success in killing a single demon. I left out the gorier details of the fight and my injuries and skipped the part where I had been branded as part of the Order's recruitment process.

Being marked as someone's property is probably not the best way to impress a girl, and yes, I wanted to impress Raven. She was a survivor with a fierce heart. Her long, beautiful black hair framed her dusky yet pale complexion while her dark red lips and light gray eyes locked my attention in place. I'm only impressive when fighting demons, and the last thing she needed was to be near more of those damned beasts. So instead, I showed her my horse, Daur.

It turns out that the dark elves don't have many horses. Living deep in the mountains, they have plenty of goats, but horses are harder to feed. Daur was on his best behavior and showing some charm. She was so fascinated by the beautiful animal that I offered to teach her to ride once she was feeling stronger.

“How about tomorrow?” she said. Her demure look was all the

convincing I needed.

“Okay, but only if you promise to behave and rest plenty today. I’m due to ride an afternoon patrol with the scouts, and when I get back, you better be sleeping.”

“It’s a deal.”

###

We sat atop our horses, taking a short rest next to Drake’s Rock. We had made good time, riding quickly up the valley from Berykholt and through the Gap.

Sentinel-scout Duncan seemed eager to test me. “How far do you feel like going?”

“I was thinking we head up to where we killed the hunting party and then start looping back around to the south, looking for any more activity. There must be some caves around there that need to be checked. If we keep moving, we should be back home in four or five hours, well within the comfort of daylight.”

“Sure thing, assuming you don’t have to stop to kill something,” he chuckled. “Just mind the rough terrain. At some point, we’ll have to dismount and walk our horses.”

Riding with us were Sentinel-scouts Laird and Tappen. We had decided that a reinforced patrol would be a good idea until we were sure the area was clear of any more rogue demons.

We continued north, reaching the original hunting party kill site. The blackened corpses were still present though well decomposed after only a couple of days. I wasn’t surprised that scavengers had left the bodies alone. They reeked of corruption and would be gone entirely in less than a week.

We dismounted and walked another mile north. The wind gusted, and the scent of a predator caught my attention. It was stalking quietly ahead of us, not a demon, but maybe a wolf or a lion?

I signaled caution to the rest of the patrol and pointed to a small bump of a hill nearby that would give us a better view. We led our horses up and waited.

We had a good view in every direction, but the only threat that I sensed came from the north side of the hill, and it was moving closer. A short time later, a small female figure appeared out of the brush

ahead of us. She was dusky dark, with large eyes and sharp ears, and stood about five feet tall. Her hair fell straight and black, and I couldn't for the life of me guess her age. She was armed with a familiar looking black blade and a long-bladed spear. She studied us in menacing fashion as if sizing up our weapons and pelts.

I called out, "Hello," trying to keep my hands from reaching for my weapons as she approached.

No need to act all hostile to one little dark elf.

"Sentinels," she said in greeting. "I am Lorna, Daughter to King Ylamil in the City-State of Bastian. We mean you no harm."

"We?" I flinched as seven more dark elves stepped out of the brush all around our little hill.

How did they sneak up on us like that?

"Lorna, my name is Ara, and we are scouts from Berykholt in Colivar. What can we do for you?"

The dark elf knew she had our complete attention. "We have traveled through the Everest range, tracking an exile from our city. Their trail ended at the dead demon party just a mile south of here."

"I certainly know of the dead demons, and I can smell their corpses from here. How is it that I can see but can't smell any of your escort?"

"Our shamans make certain talismans that can hide our presence from the many hunters in this mountain range," and saying this, she reached into a small bag on her belt and removed a black disc on a leather loop.

Placing it around her neck, she was suddenly lost to my extra senses, all except my eyesight in the bright afternoon sun. It was a hunter's amulet.

I'm sure that my complexion took on a green hue at the thought. "Lorna, you wouldn't happen to have an extra one of those, would you? I mean from one hunter to another?" *Shameless was my middle name.*

Lorna countered my offer, "Perhaps, we can trade. Would you happen to know where our quarry could have gone?"

"Exile? Quarry? Would you first explain to me why you would cast out someone and then want to hunt them down?" I still noted that our patrol was surrounded by eight expertly armed individuals.

Lorna gave me a look that said she absolutely didn't want to go there, but for some reason, I really did.

"Look," I said. "You can explain to me your need to reclaim a cast-off, or you can let us continue our hunt for demons before it gets too dark."

After a long pause, she relented, perhaps having guessed that I must know something, or I wouldn't be so insistent in my attitude.

She finally answered, leaving me just as confused, "Our King, with good reason, officially cast the half-breed into exile, ignoring the wisdom and wishes of our shamans."

"A little help here, Lorna. I'm not familiar with your King or your shamans or their differences of opinion. What interest do your shamans have in the exiled one?"

"The shamans had read the half-breed's aura and declared that they were a weapon in the making for our fight against the demons that threaten our city." There was a deeply familiar sadness layered behind her words.

A wave of anger rose in me at the mention of demons. "And how does a shaman make a weapon to fight demons?"

"They capture a soul through ritual sacrifice. The rite would remove the person's soul from their body and embed it in an ancient elvish weapon."

My stomach was starting to turn in disgust at the thought of ritual murder. "And what is so special about her soul?" I said, realizing my slip too late.

Lorna's eyes went wide but answered nonetheless, "The shamans would say that she has a soul of death, a *Kjaira* in the old tongue."

At that point, I was thankful that we had dismounted, or I might have fallen off my horse. I pulled myself together in an attempt to make sense of things.

"So, you and your royal guard were sent to capture the half-breed so that she could be sacrificed, imprisoned in a weapon, and used to fight demons?" Broken with rage, I drew my war knife at the thought.

At this, Lorna took a step back. "How is it that you wield such a weapon?" she said. "Your knife is imbued. It is a *Weapon of Kings*."

What the feth?

I took a breath, counted to five, and sheathed the fang-dagger. "The one you seek is under my protection, and she will not be harmed any further. I ask again, why are you here?"

"Is she well?" Lorna's voice quavered with concern, and her questions now offered me answers.

I replied rather harshly, "No, not in the least, but Raven is fierce. She survives. Who is she to you?"

"She is my sister." Lorna gave me a small bow, which I would say was done to hide her dark, wet eyes. There was true sadness there.

"Then, I would say that you owe me two amulets, not just one."

Chapter 12

Small Gifts

Catching the final rays of sunset, we entered the outskirts of Berykholt. My horse carried a second rider, a Royal guard from the retinue of Princess Lorna Ylamil of Bastian. The elven hunting party had begun their rough trek back home, leaving two silver talismans and a dark elf bodyguard behind. The elf's name was Andarion. He was a cousin of Lorna and trusted for the bloodline he shared. He would not be missed at court outside of the Royal Family. His absence wouldn't be mentioned to anyone, but King Ylamil would notice and know what it meant, and that was enough.

Andarion was a talker. His smooth voice worked to soothe my negative feelings toward the dark elves and their shamanic practices. It turns out that they were very similar to humans in their emotions and deep personal attachments.

Raven had been exiled by her father, King Janus Ylamil, who knew that if she remained in Bastian, she would be murdered by the elven shamans in their dark ritual. Though she could never return, King Ylamil had never severed his feelings for his youngest daughter. He had secretly sent his middle daughter on a mission to make sure that Raven survived.

Andarion had been a young adult when Raven was born and had helped raise her due to her human mother dying when Raven was only a year old. It was true that dark elves often shunned the impure, but that was usually ignored when it came to family, especially that of the Royal bloodline. They valued spirit as the building blocks of their Houses and lives, and their shamans acted as wardens or counselors.

Raven's mother was an outsider, a mysterious and beautiful human, and it was suspected that the city's shamans had begun poisoning her slowly after her baby was born. Others thought that they had simply cursed her with one of their dark rituals and sent her soul onward to a different plane.

The demons threatened the dark elves of Bastian, and the attacks were getting steadily worse for them over the years, but that seemed to be the case everywhere along the Everest range. As Vigil Snow opined, demons never forget what works and what doesn't, and unlike the living, their knowledge never ceases.

Duncan thought that there might be trouble for Andarion walking around Berykholt openly armed. People would have a difficult enough time accepting his race and his exotic looks. We agreed to post him as Raven's valet, discreetly armed. His glib manner would fit the position well.

Andarion could run night patrols with the scouts from time to time and bunk out in the North Tower. His inherent night vision and extensive knowledge of the Everest Mountains would be invaluable to the scouts. He and Duncan seemed to be of a similar age and had quickly built a rapport. After a few hours of riding together, they had somehow adopted me as their long-lost son and begun planning my demise. Well, it seemed like that anyway, as I was soon dying for the long ride to reach its end.

I left Andarion with the scouts in the North Tower. Duncan would find him some dinner and a bunk and introduce him to the rest of the crew. I asked that Andarion keep his weapons secured there and get cleaned up while I went to check on Raven and grab a late dinner.

Meeting Doctor Loeb and Sentinel Glenn in our shared living room, I let them know that there would be a new face hanging around starting tomorrow. I asked them to stop by the North Tower tonight to meet Andarion for themselves, giving them a brief update on the situation.

After cleaning up and changing into more comfortable clothes, I heard voices coming from Raven's room. I walked in on Lynda sitting by the bed, chatting away with Raven about the best horses in the stable and which would be fitting for Raven as she learned to ride.

"Ladies, I hope you have been having a restful evening," I said,

knocking on the frame of the open door.

I haven't had much time in my life for the fairer sex—none, really—but having these two beautiful young women look my way and smile did a world of good for my self-confidence. It also helped me understand Sentinel-adept Keil's overdone interest in Lynda.

Lynda hopped up and hugged me. "Glad to see you're back in one piece. They told me that your patrol was late in returning. Is everything alright?"

"We ran into a bit of trouble, but no new scars." I stumbled, trying to get over the warm hug. "Umm, actually, some pretty important things came up, important to Raven, that we need to discuss. It might be good if you stay, please."

"That sounds a bit serious." Lynda returned to her seat and crossed her arms.

I thought about where to start. There were so many things to cover, mostly good, I hoped, but I wasn't so sure in the face of Raven's exile and the reasons for it. Maybe I would just be opening fresh wounds.

Saints, forgive me.

"Raven, I'm not sure where to start," I said. "Do you know a dark elf named Lorna?"

A dumb question that. Exceedingly dumb.

Raven's answer was immediate. Surprise and torment with a pinch of terror ran across her sadly pale face. "Why—why do you ask?" she whispered.

I looked at Lynda and then back to Raven. Lynda got the hint and reached out for her hand.

"Well, I met Lorna today while on patrol in the Lower Everest, and she wanted me to bring you a gift from her father."

Reaching into my pocket, I produced a silver disc on a thin braided leather necklace. I placed it gently around Raven's neck, "It's a small gift, but I think it has a much larger meaning. Don't you?"

I sat down on the edge of her bed, waiting for her reaction, feeling the shock and confusion collide within her. And then suddenly, Raven was in my arms, sobbing, spilling out all of the pain of loss and abandonment she carried over the past weeks. My shirt and my soul seemed to soak it all up, like black blood in the darkest part of the

night. I had underestimated what she had been going through, but I could also feel a new seed of hope reaching her heart. Maybe there was more to the necklace than just being a talisman for hunters. Several minutes passed before she calmed. I wasn't in any hurry to let go.

"Always making it rain, aren't you, Ara," said Sentinel Glenn from the doorway.

I looked up, realizing our second gift had arrived.

"Raven, I have one more gift for you, and it's a bit larger. Would you give me a second to go get it?"

Lynda looked at me with raised eyebrows.

Divine, I hope this is a good idea.

Leaving the room, I looked to Glenn for his input on things. He just nodded towards Andarion, who was waiting quietly off to one side with a bittersweet look on his face.

I cornered Andarion. "Raven's been through a terribly hard time these past couple weeks and is still physically exhausted. I couldn't bear to see her tormented further. I gave her the amulet from her father, and I think she's still in shock."

"I would be too if a guy like you gave me such a gift, but we can talk about that later. Right now, family matters, so lead the way," he said, pointing to Raven's door.

"One more thing," I said, looking him in the eye, "If you walk through her door, you must promise that you won't be leaving Raven any time soon. She's had enough abandonment for one lifetime, and I won't allow anymore. Are we clear?"

And here he smiled broadly, "Mott was quite right about you. Yes, we are very clear."

"Great. Please wait out here for my signal."

Entering Raven's room, I could see a look of anticipation on her face, which I much preferred to the torment of only moments ago.

"We'll begin your riding lessons tomorrow morning if you're still up for it." I watched her face light up in anticipation. "No, I didn't get you a horse! I got you the second best thing, a valet." I ducked my head out the door and then stood aside.

I stepped Andarion, offering me a sideways glance. "Second best

to a horse? Really? And here I was going to congratulate you on your betrothal."

"Andy?" exclaimed Raven in shock.

"Yes, Rae, it's me. I've come to keep you company in your old age." Andarion responded with a grand smile, and I could feel the relief that filled them both. It seems that dark elf blood is thicker than most.

I left with Lynda a short time later, wanting to let things calm down and needing to speak with Vigil Snow about the latest events.

As soon as we were on the stairs headed to the third floor, Lynda caught my arm, "Did he just say that you were betrothed?"

"Ha, Andarion was just yanking my chain after my brilliant horse joke."

She half-chuckled at that, then gave me a quick hug and headed off to bed.

I held a long discussion with Vigil Snow and Warden Hartwell about my day, including the dark elves' demon problems and the upcoming Order promotion ceremony, which happened to coincide nicely with my eighteenth birthday. Eighteen was the official minimum age to join the Order. I would be included in the summer ceremony and allowed to pick some new adepts to train after their promotion to sentinel-adept.

Heading back down to bed, I ducked my head into Raven's room, which was now dark. She was sleeping quietly, as was Andy in the chair next to her bed.

###

The next morning found me in the stables prepping for a ride. The stable master had saddled a gentle-looking mare, gray with white splotches, named Fenny. I saddled up Daur. He looked eager for a long run, but I was going to disappoint him today. We were only going for a short tour of the area around the town of Berykholt. I was wearing my off-duty garb and only carried my war knife in its sheath across my back. My left arm was wrapped in its sturdy leather binding, and I wore my new elven talisman tucked under my shirt.

My senses picked up the approach of a pair of young ladies fresh from eating breakfast. I turned around to find Lynda and Raven walking my way. Raven was wearing her amulet, and yet I could still sense her quite clearly from a distance. I would have to ask Andarion

about that.

“Do you have a horse for me?” asked Lynda. “Ah, Fenny will do. Andy has just reminded me that we can’t allow you two to roam about without a chaperon, and well, the keep does get a bit stuffy after a while.”

“Sounds fine,” I replied, “If Raven won’t mind riding with me.” *I was going to owe Lynda big time for this.*

Raven nodded. I think she was a bit intimidated by the size of the animal before her. I adjusted my sheath to place the knife across my chest and mounted up. Reaching a hand down, I gave her a lift up behind me. She felt lighter than I’d expected.

“Can I call you Rae?”

“Sure.” She wrapped her arms around my waist. “And thank you for the gifts.”

“I think you’ll heal faster now. You already look better today than yesterday. You must have slept well with your new bodyguard to watch over you.”

“Don’t get me wrong. Having Andarion around is a luxury few will ever get to enjoy. Still, I’m sort of happy with my old bodyguard.”

“Sort of?” Mock chagrin blanketed my face. I tapped Daur with my heel, and he lurched forward for a second, causing Rae to grab me tightly to keep herself in place.

She laughed, “Oh, so we’re gonna play it that way, are we?”

We rode down through the town of Berykholt to the main bridge that spanned the Westever River. Crossing that bridge would lead you to Stonnberg after a hundred miles or so. Taking a boat on the Westever downstream for a similar distance would eventually drop you in the Gulf of Breen, right next to the city of Hamport. That coastal town was governed by the Duke of Breen, which in my opinion, sounds a whole lot better than the Duke of Hamport. They say quite a bit of livestock comes and goes along that coast.

Turning around, we headed back up toward the castle and the training fields. I switched places with Rae and gave her a chance to learn the reins. Finding a safe way to hold onto Rae proved a bit challenging. Lynda was shadowing us the whole time but keeping enough distance to allow us to enjoy each other’s company and

confidence. I could hear her laughing as Rae finally grabbed my arms and pulled them around her waist.

Upon reaching the small hill overlooking the recruit training fields, we dismounted and rested while we watched Sergeant Masterson run the troops through their paces and formations. The summer company was looking good. The other recruit companies had a long way to go.

The one significant advantage we had over the demons was the ability to form and hold disciplined formations that fit the terrain and battle situation. On the other hand, according to Captain Glenn, demons would always operate in an open formation or a chaotic, disorganized block of rampaging death, depending on one's perspective and how close a sentinel was to the front rank.

Standing off to one side of the field, I could see a group of four recruits. A couple of them looked familiar, so I suggested we walk down to meet them at the risk of Masterson's ire. Sure enough, we met Hicks, Griffen, Lucas, and a rather large fellow wearing a sling on his left arm.

"You must be Gunner," I said, getting a curious nod.

Gunner was the oldest of the group, maybe twenty years old. I pegged Hicks as the same age as me, with Lucas and Griffen being nineteen or twenty. For Hicks to hold the alpha slot of his company at such a young age was impressive.

I shook hands all around. "I'm Ara. This is Raven, and this is Vigil Snow's daughter, Lynda. I just wanted to check on all of you, make sure you were in good shape for your upcoming promotion."

Griffen, the tallest of the bunch, chimed in for the rest, "Well, after that lesson you gave us yesterday, we're only a bit concussed. We'll be back to marching and running in no time."

"I'm glad to hear it. My arm is still aching from the impacts. I've never given it much of a chance to heal since a demon bit right through it."

That got their attention. Their eyes had been lingering a bit too long on the girls for my liking.

So, this is what jealousy feels like?

Gunner looked at me with disbelief. "You got into a fight with a demon, and you still have all your body parts attached? How did you

get away from it?"

"I killed it with my knife. Here's its tooth as proof." I drew my fang-blade and flipped the knife around.

Raven took a step back, a startled look on her face.

Lynda already knew my story from her father. "The kill was confirmed by my father during the Lockrun excursion," she spoke proudly. "They said it was a *Kjaira*."

Oh, feth.

I looked over at Raven as she began to back away from me. She turned and ran toward the Castle, signaling the end to a great morning.

"Lynda, please take the horses and go with Raven. Make sure she finds Andarion right away. That is very important."

Lynda mounted up with a confused look and trotted off after Raven.

Griffen nudged me with a grin, "Is Lynda your girlfriend?"

"No, actually, Raven is more my type of girl. We rescued her just north of Adam's Peak a couple of nights back. A Hellion hunting party was chasing her down when our scout patrol intercepted them."

"What's a Hellion hunting party?" asked Hicks.

"This one had eight demons, one of which, a big half-man, half-bull demon, was dominant enough to lead," I replied.

"How did you save her?" asked Hicks.

"You all know there's only one answer to that. The brilliant part was near the end of the fight when there was only a single demon left alive. I was trying to keep that last one from escaping, and Raven came running in and carved it up but good. She's fierce. I may have fallen in love with her right then and there."

They all smiled in appreciation at that.

"Look, please keep this under your hats, or Sergeant Masterson will chew me up, but I'm looking to recruit some of the best from the summer company for advanced training. Vigil Snow has already given me approval. I'd like to talk to you right after the ceremony if you're interested."

"You've gotten our attention," said Gunner. "Now, I'd say you best get after that girl and sort things out."

Chapter 13

Soul of a Kjaira

I replayed Raven's reaction in my mind as I raced for the castle gate. She obviously knew the meaning of the word *Kjaira*, and it terrified her, as did my knife, my imbued knife. According to her sister, Raven's only crime was that she had the soul of a *Kjaira*. She was exiled by her father to avoid being sacrificed and imprisoned as an imbued weapon. And there I go, basically bragging about how I had killed a *Kjaira* and waving the resulting weapon right in front of her face. Okay, I'm not winning any scholar awards any time soon.

Reaching our living room, I could hear the heated discussion in Raven's bedroom. Andy was there, as was Lynda, trying to calm Raven down.

I stepped into the bedroom. Lynda shrugged at me and quietly walked out. She didn't know the whole story. I hadn't told any of my potential friends the entire truth. I had my reasons, but I was feeling more and more certain that I needed to apologize to Lynda Snow.

Raven had quieted down at my entrance. Andy took this as a sign and left the room, too, closing the door gently behind him. Raven watched from the far corner, sitting on the floor, tear tracks fresh on her face. She was scared and angry and confused. Her body trembled beneath the weight of it all.

I was disgusted with myself for being so careless around the one person with whom I'd connected. I sat down on the floor, too, against the wall a few feet away and took a deep breath. "Rae, I'm so sorry. That was careless of me."

She didn't respond so I continued, "I'm here to protect you, and yet I

should have been more honest with you about who and what I am.”

She whispered, “What are you then?”

“I’m a weapon, Rae, imbued, it seems, with unique knowledge and an ability to fight demons. A couple of months ago, I killed a *Kjaira*, a powerful death demon, and in doing so was claimed by Vigil Snow and the Order, much as the shamans in Bastian wanted to claim you.”

At this point, I removed the leather brace from my arm so that she could see the cost of killing that dark beast. My arm, scarred and mangled, ached with every beat of my heart. It was a reminder to me that I was alive. That I still survived.

“Why do you carry that soul knife?”

“It feels as if it’s part of me. I think my own life ended when that demon finally died, like I became someone else, like the soul of the *Kjaira* I killed lives on with me somehow. Your sister Lorna told me that the shamans saw a *Kjaira*, a soul of Death, in you. Maybe that is the connection that I feel with you now.”

My stomach was turning, and my thoughts were stumbling. Lost in my attempt to share the confusing reality of my life, I finally found a straightforward truth.

“Surviving is not living, Rae. Meeting you has reminded me that maybe I can do more than just survive. That maybe I can belong to someone other than just the Vigil.”

Maybe I can belong to someone like you.

I hadn’t planned on spilling my guts to this fierce, beautiful girl, but once I got rolling, things just rose to the surface. Being honest with her forced me to be honest with myself and acknowledge my scars, fears, and desires. In that moment of clarity, I knew what I must do.

“And where are you going?” She suddenly reached out to take my hand. Her anxiety spiked.

I stood up slowly and stepped back. “I just need to show you,” I said. “Before I go. So that you will know that I’ll be coming back.”

I took off my shirt, exposing the angry scars of my battles and my branding, front and back. I stood mute, sensing Rae’s reaction. Her feeling of shock rattled me further, and I did my best not to bolt from the room in shame.

She stood up and moved closer, looking at my chest. “You are

wearing a royal talisman of Bastian. Did Lorna give that to you?"

I nodded, unable to speak. Rae suddenly relaxed.

She pulled out her silver amulet and showed me that it matched perfectly with the one that I wore. "See, it's official. We're a pair," she found a smile. "By my father, the King, we are connected. We are betrothed."

I pulled on my shirt. "B—betrothed? Aren't we a little young to be married?"

"I didn't say we were married. I only meant that you...belong to me." Rae leaned forward to kiss me, but then she stopped. "I claim you, Ara. Do you accept me and my soul of death?"

I whispered, "On my soul and honor, I do."

I closed the gap between us, tasting the salt on her cheeks and lips. Our bodies clung to each other as our souls circled the room.

We left Rae's room a fast minute later. The storm of confusion and dark emotions had subsided for us both.

Andy looked up from his chair in relief. "Congratulations, Ara. Rae, are you sure about what you are doing? I mean, he hasn't even promised you a horse."

Raven laughed, grabbing my hand again. "Well, he got me the next best thing, didn't he?"

"Andy, please join us for lunch," I said. "I want to get a better idea of the demonic threat to Bastian, the threat to Raven posed by the shamans there, and how determined they might be to track her down."

He scoffed, "And there goes my happy moment."

Lynda Snow and Captain Glenn also joined us for lunch. We explained to them the situation with the dark elves in Bastian and the threat of their shamans to Raven.

According to Andy, the situation in Bastian was becoming dire. The Order of the Vigil used every possible weapon at its disposal to counter the demons, and there should be no surprise that the dark elf shamans did the same.

I had decided that someone (me) would travel up to Bastian to work things out with the shamans and deal with their demon problem. Already being claimed by the Order should protect me from their schemes.

Putting it mildly, Raven and Lynda disagreed with my idea. Andy nodded his support, and Glenn looked wholly uncertain.

Addressing Glenn, I said, "I'll run this by Vigil Snow before departing, of course, and if I hurry, I should make it back in time for the summer promotion ceremony." I looked at the ladies. "Raven would be safe here with Andy and the sentinel-scouts on alert. Andy can move into my room in the keep, so he'll always be near Raven."

Raven's anxiety was through the roof.

"And where will you be?" she argued. "Camped out on some cold mountain trail trying to stay awake and warm for a week straight? You'll recall that I've just done that journey myself. It was Hell, and I would have died an ugly death if you hadn't come along when you did."

She had a point. I would need some sentinels to go along, and I knew just where to find them.

"Andy, you wouldn't happen to have an extra Talisman that I could borrow for a fortnight?"

###

Vigil Snow gave his approval, with the explicit requirement that I returned in time for the summer promotion ceremony. He would double the castle guard until I came back. He also allowed me to pull from the summer recruit class with Sergeant Masterson's final approval.

Masterson gave me the choice of his walking wounded. "Pick two," he said, with the caveat that I return them whole for promotion.

"Hicks and Gunner," I answered immediately. He nodded as if he already knew my answer and told me where to find them.

I finished up my afternoon at the recruits' barracks with the summer company.

"How's your head? Feel like taking a little trip with me?" I said to Brandon Hicks. "You'd miss the last week or two of training before promotion."

Heads popped up all around the barracks hall. I spotted Gunner a couple of bunks away and waved him over.

"Is Gunner a first name or a last name?" I asked.

"My full name is Gunner Trew, but everyone just calls me Gunner."

Gunner had a relaxed manner to offset his powerful frame and

confident air. His sandy blonde hair and dimpled chin would have made him stand out with or without a heavy axe on his back. He was a good two inches taller and twenty pounds heavier than Hicks and me.

“How’s your arm? Can you swing a light axe?”

“Sure, it’s just a sprain now. I’d even swing a heavy one if ordered.”

“We’re going light. I’d like you and Hicks to see me safely to the dark elf city of Bastian, about a hundred miles north of here through the Everest range. It’s rough country, but the passes are open this time of year. We’ll need to get there and back safely before promotion time. Before you ask, Masterson has already signed off on the trip.”

“This have anything to do with the girl Raven that ran off this morning?” asked Hicks. “She is half dark elf, isn’t she?”

“Yes. This mission has everything to do with Raven and the demons that are threatening the dark elves. As far as I can tell, if we don’t do something now, trouble will find us in spades later. We can talk more on the road. Bring your light kit, a warm cloak, canteens, plus dry food for a week. Meet me at the North Tower of the Castle tomorrow at dawn. We’ll head out from there with the first scout patrol of the day.”

In one long month, I had gone from an aimless orphan to someone that depended upon others to survive just as they depended on me. Rae still didn’t want me to go on the trip, but she also intended to do everything she could to help me get there and back. With Andy’s help, she had sketched out a map of the route to Bastian. The landmarks they supplied should be easy to follow, and with three of us on the trip, we ought to be able to sit watches and get some sleep along the way. Andy had offered up his talisman, and I figured that the recruits could take turns wearing it. One would be the hunter, and one would be the goat.

Raven made it a point that I was never to remove my talisman, and she promised that she would do the same. She felt that we had a connection through them now, which would serve us both. The added activity and anxiety of the day had completely worn her out, and we sent her to bed early. I would do everything in my power to fix things for her in Bastian and hoped that my time away would give her a chance to recover fully.

I catnapped overnight and then got myself kitted out while it was still

dark. Ducking my head into Raven's room before heading out, I found her sleeping peacefully with Andy snoring away in her bedside chair. I didn't wake them.

The dawn broke clear. We all mounted up and rode out fast with the first Day Shift Patrol. Mott Duncan led the way. Hicks and Gunner were as eager as I to make good time while we had the use of horses. We'd lose them soon enough. We circled east of Adam's peak, as usual, and headed north.

We had gone about fifteen miles in the first few hours before the terrain became too rough to continue. We dismounted and handed off the horses to the patrol to be taken back to Berykholt. We still had most of a day on foot ahead of us, and my goal was to cover another twenty-five miles in the eight hours before dark. With summer arriving, the smugglers tracks and game trails were easy to spot. We made use of many.

I was keeping track of potential caves that would need exploring, tagging them on my hand-drawn map. The first day passed without incident, but as the sun went down, I could feel the hills and cliffs around us change, becoming alive with a variety of nocturnal beasts.

We found a suitable campsite tucked in near a partially collapsed cliff. Having large boulders on two sides with the cliff at our backs gave us adequate protection. We rolled a few smaller rocks into place so that we could build a fire without being too easily seen. The low wall also gave us some cover from the cool night wind.

I took the first watch and leaned against the large boulder adjacent to the camp. Hicks and Gunner rested near the warmth of the fire. Hicks was still showing some signs of a concussion, so I had him wear our extra hunter's amulet. Wolves howled in the distance, more than a mile away. I waited to see if they picked up our trail.

Six hours later, maybe two hours from dawn, feeling stiff from sitting still for so long, I roused Gunner for the final watch until morning. We had made considerable progress on the first day, covering a good third or more of our journey. I wanted to keep pushing. The higher altitude was sure to wear us down, and there was no telling what we'd run into in the future.

###

The real trouble started at the end of our second day. We had just cleared a glacier that signaled the halfway mark of our journey. We were making steady progress. The mountain of snow and ice had funneled us along a well-worn game trail that ran to the east before turning back to the north and dropping us down into a long narrow valley. The valley before us was heavily forested and would determine our path for the next dozen miles. It had been carved from the mountain range by the nearby glacier and had ragged-looking cliffs on either side. It was a perfect chokepoint for any hunters, and I could sense a few roaming the valley floor ahead of us.

Not having a suitably safe spot to camp, we pressed on after dark. I switched our spare amulet over to Gunner and took point while he trailed Hicks.

A mile off to the right, a large, slow-moving predator skirted the edge of the valley and then disappeared from my senses. There must be caves nearby. Perhaps this is where the King's Realm Guard did the recruiting for their ursine mounts. Behind us, a pack of six wolves had picked up our scent. Their yips and howls were coming closer with every mile that we traversed. We were about halfway across the valley when we finally had to stop and face them.

I helped Hicks climb up into a nearby tree after marking his territory at its base. The more the pack focused on Brandon, the better. Gunner and I hid in some brush off of the trail about thirty yards away. With hunter's amulets around our necks and our plan mapped out, we waited silently.

These were black wolves, the far more sizable cousins of the gray wolves that roamed the plains in the central regions of Colivar. They loped into view led by an alpha wolf the size of a small pony and circled Hicks's tree, howling. I drew my axe and crept forward, coming up behind them. Ten yards out, I threw my axe into the hindquarter of the alpha. As the wolf spun in place, trying to get at the axe blade embedded in its back hip, Hicks threw his axe down into the back of another and howled at the pack, trying to keep their attention.

I charged in with my war knife and punched a fang-sized hole into the back of the alpha's neck, sending it thrashing to the ground. Grabbing my axe, I raced left, away from the large, downed wolf. I

swung for the back legs of another as it darted in and out, clipping it soundly and drawing a harsh yelp as it stumbled away.

The now leaderless pack turned to face me as one. I held my ground, and when one overly aggressive wolf drew near, I landed a chop into its skull, sending it into the dirt.

Demons had far thicker skin.

At that moment, Gunner came sneaking in behind them, hitting another across its spine and adding to Hicks' howling. The remaining few scattered, scampering away into the night. We quickly finished off the wounded wolves and hit the trail northward, hoping that the fresh blood and carcasses would divert the attention of any predators in the area.

We finally climbed out of the valley just as dawn was breaking. Being back in rocky terrain, we were able to find a sheltered spot to eat and rest. By my map, I estimated that we had less than forty miles to go. I planned on covering half of that today before bedding down for the night. We had been pushing hard, and I kept wondering when we would sight our first demonkind.

"So far, so good," I said as we ate. "Our progress keeps up, and we should arrive by tomorrow night. I'm hoping we start to see some signs of civilization soon."

"Any idea what we'll do when we get there? Are we even sure that they'll let us into their city?" said Hicks.

"I have a message for the King and another for his shamans."

"And you think that he'll be open to seeing you? Do you even know him?"

"I don't, but I know his exiled daughter. In fact, I happen to be betrothed to her. That sort of makes me his son-in-law, doesn't it?"

Gunner chuckled, "Exiled son-in-law, maybe. Does that even count?"

"Well, we'll just have to hope we didn't waste our time," I replied.

"All I can say is that this trip is a whole lot more interesting than recruit formation drills." He earned an eager nod from Hicks.

"My best guess is that the King will agree to see me, especially if we offer to help sort out his demon problem. Everything I've heard says that they are desperate to find a solution to a growing problem.

Addressing that should remove all sorts of potential threats for Raven and the Order.”

“So, it’s not really about who you know. It’s about what you can kill?” said Hicks.

“Exactly.”

Chapter 14

Royal Blood

Malevolence marred the northern horizon as we neared the end of our journey. We were ten miles from what my map claimed was the City of Bastian, with plenty of early afternoon light left to guide us. The pass ahead of us would eventually open into a broad valley that held the elven city. The pass itself might seem like a decent track if one was a mountain goat. As for us, it was an opportunity to walk, shuffle, crawl, climb, and wend our way forward, and, by the looks of things, we were passing through a demon-filled backdoor to get there.

The demonic came and went in the rocky hills before us. There had to be quite a few infested caves ringing the valley, and I was wondering if we shouldn't just delve into one to see what trouble could be found. With my senses peeled, Gunner played the goat and Hicks played the hunter as we scrambled onward through the hazy afternoon. With each step forward, the picture became more challenging.

One, I signaled.

Our first demon was less than a mile ahead of us. It was loud, vibrating with unbridled rage.

We had to remove it before going any further—no sense in leaving any devils alive behind us if we could help it. I drew my fang-blade and motioned both of my companions to follow more closely behind me.

We reached a small gully in the mountainside with several tall boulders strewn all about. The demon was there somewhere; I could feel it but not yet see it. We completely circled the ravine and the rocks. Still, no visible sign, and I didn't sense any movement either.

The ditch must lead to a cave. We slid into the gully and spotted an opening on the upper end. Our demon had to be waiting within.

I inched forward into the darkness of the cave, giving my eyes a chance to adjust, and there, just off to the right, was a friendly wolf-man from Hell.

It didn't move but rather shifted upright and turned to face me. The beast seemed to hesitate as I took another step forward, and it did the unthinkable. It bowed to me in submission. Odd that. I planted my fang into the top of its head, drawing out a stream of black smoke and a wretched howl as the monster writhed on the cave's rough floor.

Gunner and Hicks had come in behind me and were now covering their nose and ears at the unholy eruption. My axe took off the beast's head to shut it up. None of us were sure how far sound would carry in these hills or if the echoes would confuse our enemy. The cave was shallow and empty except for the black cloud of corruption and the fresh carcass.

We resumed our trek northward angling deeper into the pass. Our eagerness to outrun the coming darkness and the anticipation of reaching our goal drove us forward.

Dusk approached as I marched toward the next demon's location. It had much the same vibe as the gully cave and was generally in line with our destination. This one was outside. Planted like a boulder on the side of the mountain, the wolf-headed fiend waited for us to approach. I swapped from my knife to my axe and put our goat, Gunner, to the front with his shield and light axe. Hicks and I lagged a few yards behind and to either side of him, relying on our elven talismans to remain unnoticed.

Twenty paces from the beast, Gunner had had enough of its statue-still presence. He howled and the demon reacted, launching itself into a charge on all fours with its head aimed low.

My anger boiled at the sight, but I held back, watching the violent impact as the demon smashed into Gunner's shield.

The young man didn't flinch. He staggered back a few steps trying to keep his balance, keeping his shield at the ready and putting himself directly between Hicks and me. The snarling beast grasped Gunner's shield, yanking it downward with one claw while attacking wildly with

the other. A split second later, Hicks' axe took it in the side of the neck, shearing most of its head away and slamming it to the ground. Gunner kicked at the fallen beast, sending it tumbling down the hillside to our right.

I told them to hold.

Fast approaching from our left was a goat-faced demon, its size exceeding the first. It homed in on Gunner but had the misfortune of crossing directly in front of me. That was the beginning of its end. I sheared off its right leg in passing with my axe, slowing its collision with Gunner's shield, and he quickly dispatched it with a quick chop to the back of its neck.

Sergeant Masterson's training had one major flaw. His sheltered fields could only do so much, and nothing there could compare with the rush of fear and the chance to overcome it. As harsh as he was, Masterson couldn't emit a wave of psyche-shattering energy on the recruits. It had to be experienced firsthand, and it gave credence to the difference between an adept and a full-blooded sentinel. None of us said a word about it, but I could see the effects the encounters had on Gunner and Hicks.

Dusk arrived, and we still had a few more miles to go. For the moment, our front was clear, though a mile to our right and downhill, something stirred. I held my war-blade in my left hand, axe in my right. Jogging across the slope and the scree, we could see the Valley of Bastian in the distance. It was all downhill from there.

A mile further on, we found a large cave opening tucked into the hill beside a wall of rough-hewn boulders. The mouth of the cave was active, and I counted four demons waiting outside.

Do demons mill about?

I moved in low and fast, coming around onto the hill above the opening and jumped down into their midst. With gravity on its side, my axe bisected the head of the largest, an ant-beast with spiral horns instead of antennae. Before any of the others could react, I backhanded my fang through a hairless dog-man's ear, sending it toppling back into the darkness of the cave.

The arm of the next Hellion fell to the ground as its mantis-like claws swung my way. Hicks landed at that moment, taking off its other

arm and severing its head as it screeched and dove for his neck. The fourth fiend, a thick-shelled crab-creature, was scrambling on all fours back up the hill, trying to get at Gunner who was perched above the cave mouth. Gunner leaped forward, punching out his shield and shattering the demon's carapace before it could rise to the attack. His axe did the rest.

The cave looked far deeper than the last and had several demons stirring within it. Unable to get a clear count, I signaled for us to move on—fast. We took off at a run down the slope with our weapons and travel packs bouncing on our backs.

The cool summer night grew warmer as we reached the Valley of Bastian. The lamplights of the walled city sparkled in the distance. We were drenched in sweat and struggling to keep our feet under us with a dozen or so demons rambling in our wake. Raven and I would have similar stories to swap in our old age.

The demons' hunger was like a firebrand in my mind, and it sparked a rage I couldn't ignore. I peeled off to the side and crouched, telling Gunner and Hicks to keep going.

Brandishing the fang-dagger in my left hand, I roared back at the demons, throwing a sense of confusion into their midst. I charged back uphill into the nearest beast as dark hunters rose from the ground all around us. Dozens of blades flashed in the moonlight, and the mountains became eerily quiet for miles around.

I called down the hill for Hicks and Gunner to wait up and hurried to meet them. By the time I got there, we were surrounded by two dozen dark elves with long-bladed spears.

Off to my right, an elven voice greeted me, "Hello, Ara."

"Hello, Lorna," I said, turning. "What brings you out on such a lovely summer night?"

"Reports of someone stoking the demons in our southern hills. Why am I not surprised that it is you? How many did you kill?"

"We killed eight on our way in. A great welcome party you have here. Thank you for the help." I nodded at the black smudges strewn behind us on the hill.

"No, thank you and your friends here for playing the sheep. It was a perfect ambush, no losses on our side, and we took a dozen more

demons off the mountain for good.”

“Goat. Sentinel Gunner Trew is the goat,” I said, pointing out the young man. “And this is Sentinel Hicks. They’re my personal guard.”

“More sentinel-scouts?” she asked.

“No, not yet anyway, but they’re some alpha-level recruits.”

“Recruits braving the Everest. Whose idea was that?”

“Whose idea was it to send your sister out into the night alone?” I didn’t expect Lorna to enjoy my tone.

She didn’t. “That isn’t your concern, human, but I can’t wait to hear the king’s answer.”

Most of the dark elves dispersed as Lorna and her Royal guard detail led us into Bastian. It was a huge city built mainly of stone, from the thirty-foot-tall curtain wall to the inner hold and keep structures.

The Valley of Bastian was a logical site for the reclusive elves to build. The valley itself was ten miles wide and ran almost thirty miles deep, north to south. The surrounding mountains provided a ready supply of builder’s stone, and I figured many of the caves in the area began their lives as mines or quarries for the city. There was also plenty of timber and pastureland and a large lake that covered the northern end of the valley. If not for the present ring of demons, it would be a perfect spot for a small, reclusive kingdom.

We were soon safely settled in a remote wing of the Royal Keep. It had been an exhausting end to a rough four days, and we were all ready to sleep. I was given a private room, with Hicks and Gunner sharing the one next door.

Lorna stuck around to speak with me in private. “May I see your talisman?” She flaunted a knowing smile.

I lifted the device out of my shirt, holding it up, but keeping its leather necklace looped around my neck. Lorna reached out and touched the silver disc for a few seconds.

“Welcome, brother,” she smiled. Then she reached up and gave me a warm embrace.

What was I supposed to do? I hugged her back. Dark elves weren’t the bitter cold devils I’d expected.

“And how is Andarion getting along living south of the Everest range these days?”

"I'd say that he's had his work cut out for him, but his presence has made a big difference for Raven. That's why I'm here."

Lorna let her concern show, "How is your betrothed?"

"I wasn't sure she would survive her broken heart but giving her strong connections to hold her in place has helped her a lot."

"And you? How do you feel about *things*?"

"Confused, yet certain. I'm not so sure of my present standing in many ways, but I know how I feel about Raven. We fought our way here so that she could have a better chance at living and regaining what was lost."

"And your plans in Bastian?"

"My plans involve your shamans and ending certain threats to those under my protection. If King Ylamil has time, I would love to meet with him as well and discuss how to eliminate the presence of the demons around the Valley."

"You would have to be completely discreet about certain topics but meeting my father may prove helpful in getting the attention of the shamans. And it would be a pleasant surprise for him, so let's plan on breakfast in the Royal Quarters first thing in the morning."

"Can I bring my guards?"

"Certainly, bring all three. They can eat in the kitchen."

"Three?" I asked.

She walked to my door, opening it onto the back of a waiting sentry. "Yseria, please come in."

To my surprise, in strode a young female dark elf with an edgy air of self-confidence. Exotic didn't even begin to describe her. A lithe, graceful form with a black blade strapped across her back, Yseria was tall for a dark elf—a few inches taller than Lorna but shorter than Raven. She had darker toned skin and short wavy hair that was completely white. Like a bored predator taking in new surroundings, her self-assured demeanor whispered a challenge as she looked me over.

"Ara, meet Yseria Warric. Using your terms, she would be considered an alpha of the Royal Guard. Only my cousin Andarion can beat her in a duel, and with him being indisposed elsewhere, we've had a bit of friction with the other guards here. Your status demands

we provide a Royal Guard, and I can think of no better place for Yseria than at your side.”

“And by friction, you mean events leading to stays in the infirmary?” I was beginning to understand where this was going.

Lorna nodded. Yseria met my eyes with defiance.

“Is she of royal blood?” I asked, interested in her House.

Lorna replied, “No, she’s from the line of Warric, not Ylamil, and that is much of the problem. You can ask her about her family history when you get the chance. She is the last of her line.”

That statement wiped the smirk from Yseria’s face.

“Yseria Warric, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” I held out my hand. “I’m not sure that I’ll be making many friends during my visit here, and I’m grateful to have your protection.”

Yseria merely nodded and resumed her post outside.

Turning back to Lorna, I said, “We have more to discuss, and tomorrow will certainly be an interesting day.”

Chapter 15

Harbor a Devil

Breakfast began well. The lake trout with mushrooms was delicious. Along with the fresh bread and hot coffee, I felt ready for the day. My goal was to leave Bastian as soon as possible—the day after next at the latest—meaning we would need to get several things sorted immediately. Extending our stay would only put my companions and me at further risk and make us late for the Order's promotion ceremony.

I sat next to Lorna at the far end of a rather long table, easily suitable for twenty but only seating seven this morning. My guards ate at a small side table nearby. Hicks and Gunner seemed to be all in when it came to Yseria Warric. The dark elf kept her expression entirely neutral and said little to the two young men. She wasn't that much older than us, though with elves one could never tell.

Sitting next to Lorna was her older sister Tamira and then King Janis Ylamil himself. The King was a frail-looking fellow with gray eyes and white hair. I was told that dark elves aged much slower than humans, often living as old as two hundred years or more, but I hadn't a guess as to his real age. He had outlived three different wives over the years. They had all succumbed during childbirth. Raven's human mother had been considered a royal consort rather than his wife or queen.

Across from King Ylamil was one of the King's sons, Jhute, and his wife, Phaedra. On the far side of the King was Khamros, High Shaman of Bastian and Chief Counselor to the King. He was also the King's younger brother by several decades. Khamros looked middle-aged to

me and seemed to hold as much power as the king in the family circle.

I was the odd man out here. The family's conversation flowed quietly past as if I weren't there. Lorna had already filled me in on the perceptiveness of the King and the dark elves in general. My presence had its own meaning, and most of had been discerned the moment we sat down to eat.

Nearing the end of the meal, Lorna stood up and formally introduced me as a demon-hunter from the Order of the Vigil in the Kingdom of Colivar. The mention of the word demon seemed a terrific conversation starter and diverted attention away from other more sensitive topics like the fact that I sat at the Royal Family table.

"Young man, what brings you north to our city?" said King Ylamil. "It has been decades since I've met with a Colivarian delegation."

"I'm here to help with your demon problem," I offered. "And maybe do some trading."

Khamros interjected, "It is the duty of the Houses and the Brethren of the Shamanic Order to protect the city of Bastian from the demons that plague us. You may find that I am a bit curious as to how someone so young as yourself could possibly help."

I looked to Lorna, biting back my first answer.

"With Ara's assistance, we estimate that twenty demons were destroyed yesterday on the southern edge of the valley," she said. "Without any losses on our side."

Khamros continued the interrogation, "And how many demons have you killed, Ara?"

"Ten," I replied. "But I haven't been at it all that long, and I was gravely wounded for much of the time." I showed off my left arm's leather brace.

"Forgive me if that doesn't fill me with great confidence," Khamros chuckled in retort. "We've got hundreds of the fiends keeping us company."

"You also mentioned trading," said the King, keeping to the point of my visit.

"I'm here to do some trading that I hope is beneficial to us all," I said as I pulled out the silver talisman from under my shirt. "One weapon for another."

Khamros' eyes narrowed at the sight of it, and then he looked at the King. "Who gave him that, Sire?"

Ylamil answered without hesitation, "I did. Now, are you going to listen to what he has to offer?"

Khamros finally nodded at me, clearly miffed at being out of the loop on my status. "Go on."

I began with a summary of the situation, "You have a city under siege here. You have a valley surrounded by lesser devils that roam freely from the numerous caves in the area. The walls here are strong but leave most of the valley unprotected. We killed twenty rogues last night, but, as Khamros said, I would guess a couple hundred more are scattered about in singles and small groups. All of those are likely being controlled by a few higher-order demons hidden away nearby. Otherwise, over time, most of the demons would have wandered off into the mountains in search of easier prey. Do you have any idea of the source of this infestation or why Bastian is a target?"

Lorna didn't wait for Khamros to respond. "We presume one of the nearby mines is a source as the demon's numbers are always being replenished. As to why, well, I will leave that to Khamros or the King to answer."

The conversation was fast becoming interesting, though the thought of a cave full of demons was a nightmare in the making.

Ylamil began with the stone cold truth, "The history of the dark elves is rife with scheming, violence, and betrayal. We have always been better enemies than allies, even to our elven brethren in other cities. Bastian is one result of this, being tucked away in these mountains with limited outside contact. For centuries we have lived in relative peace.

"That all changed about five years ago, shortly after a delegation from the northern Kingdom of Niantia arrived on a not so diplomatic mission. Our border with Niantia is only twenty miles farther north from our valley, where the mountains end and a great region of plains begins. Their King has decided that having a foreign city so close to their southern border was a threat. They offered a treaty in exchange for numerous concessions on our side, including the holding of Ylamil Royal family hostages. Keeping things short, they were refused, and

they left with vague threats against us and our valley.”

Khamros jumped in, “A few months later, the first demon sightings occurred, and the problem continues to grow. The ability of our military, while formidable against the soldiers of other realms, is not fit or trained to fight the demons. As elves, we don’t have the physical mass to hold them back in a pitched battle. Also, the demon’s ability to ignore anything but a killing wound means that our losses are always heavy in our attempts to eliminate them. Our vigilance and stone walls have helped keep them out of the city, but they have an ever-tightening stranglehold on our kingdom.

“Bastian’s shamans have searched for the source of the demons, and we believe that we have located it. There is a large mine to the northeast where we traced Infernal magics. We assume it is the source of the Infernal outbreak. That mine must contain a portal or some object for the demons to use to enter our domain. Unfortunately, any attempt to investigate has proven deadly for us. Over the past few years, the demons have grown bolder, and we have grown more desperate for any weapons that could turn the tide and allow us to eradicate this blight from our lands.”

“That is why I’m here,” I said. “Your shamans seek to claim the power of a *Kjaira* to wield in this fight. I now understand your motivation and offer you an alternative weapon, something better than a *Kjaira*.”

The King’s interest spiked, “And what is that, Ara?”

“Me.”

“And what would you want in return?”

“This.” I tapped the silver disc. “And its connection to your House, but more than anything, I want your daughter’s decree of Exile to be fully rescinded.”

Khamros interjected, “Before we go any further with this, before we risk any lives or make any decrees, I demand that we test Ara. We must have proof of his capabilities. He claims he is superior to a *Kjaira*. How are we to believe that he’s truly the weapon that we need?”

“How did you determine that the King’s youngest daughter had the soul of a *Kjaira*?” I said.

“We did a shamanic reading and found her spirit to be corrupted,”

he replied.

“A child born of the King corrupted? Then why wasn’t she killed at birth?” I said, anger swelling within. “Why harbor a devil for so long?”

“She was tested at birth and found to be clean. Of that, I am certain. It was only more recently that the *Kjaira* was noticed,” explained Khamros. “We don’t know how or why evil spirits enter our world, but some take up homes within the living to further their existence. As a member of the Order of the Vigil, you must know this.”

“What does this have to do with the Order?” I didn’t like the direction that Khamros was taking.

“The Order has long practiced the marking of their powerful members to claim outright ownership and protect them from the outside influence of evil entities.”

From my startled expression, they could see that I recognized the truth in his words.

“Do you agree to this shamanic testing before proceeding further?” King Ylamil asked.

“Yes. Can we start right now?” I pulled out my fang-blade and placed it on the table in front of me.

The smirk melted from Khamros’ face.

###

Royal Shaman Palypsos was not what I expected. I should have realized my misconceptions upon meeting his boss, the aristocratic and well-dressed Khamros. I was in a room deep beneath the castle. Moisture and mildew filled my senses. I had expected fire and incense, a cauldron boiling away in the corner, and maybe some sort of exotic ritual. Instead, I sat in a sturdy chair across from Palypsos, who wore simple attire, in an unremarkable room. My three bodyguards leaned against the wall by the door as witnesses. Khamros was also present, along with a small Royal scribe named Oeil. This scene felt more like a meeting with a clerk than a shaman. What did I know about devil magic? Obviously, very little.

“I’d certainly be waving a colorful something or other if this process had anything to do with our world,” Palypsos answered my thoughts. “As it is, we are severely limited in our resources. I was once able to use the eyes of a dead demon to plot their point of origin to a cave to

our northeast. The eyes had completely disintegrated an hour later. Now you have offered me something much more solid to use.”

“Why hasn’t the fang disintegrated like everything else that I’ve killed?” I said.

“It is imbued, empowered with a *Kjaira* soul that preserves it.”

“And the leather straps that help to hold it in place and wrap the dagger’s grip? Those were cut from the same *Kjaira*,” I countered.

Palypsos sniffed the blade.

“Your blood seems to preserve them,” he said. “Interesting. Let’s begin.”

Holding my war knife, he used the fang to gently pierce the lobe of his left ear, leaving the dagger hanging like some gaudy earring with blood dripping slowly onto his shoulder. Then he closed his eyes and began some sort of odd breathing pattern. We all just watched and waited. It didn’t take long.

The shaman spoke in a reedy distant voice, “*Fei-Krull, Kjaira of Lis-Xiana* beckons you forth. Even though she has been well fed in death, her hunger echoes through her master.”

“Who is her master?” I asked.

“You are. You have claimed her. *Lis-Xiana* mourns,” said the reedy voice.

“And who am I?” I wondered how I could claim a demon.

“You,” Palypsos hesitated for a moment, and the voice changed into something far more wretched. It rasped, “You are a House of War. You are *Firefanged*.”

I screamed and jumped out of my chair in surprise, expecting my body to burst into ebony flames. After a few moments, nothing had happened. Khamros looked at me in surprise. My guards looked at each other and chuckled. Inside joke, I guess. I checked my pants to make sure they were still dry. *Mostly*.

Palypsos handed back my knife, now clean. His face was gray. Well, it was sort of gray to begin with, but his pallor had paled.

Regaining my composure, I spoke to Khamros, “Okay, I think we’re done here. Are you satisfied? Do we have an agreement to proceed?”

Khamros looked a bit shaken himself as he double-checked with the scribe on what was said. He nodded, “I am. We do. Let us go see the

King.”

Chapter 16

Hell-diving

After a short talk with Khamros, King Ylamil eagerly agreed to my terms. A dark elven warband marched from the city less than two hours later. We had fifty dark elves armed with their long-bladed spears plus Lorna and her seven Royal guards, all armed with spears and their heavy blackblades. My three guards carried their usual assortment of blades and axes.

I was beginning to appreciate the easy decisiveness of the King. A century or more of leading his people had endowed Ylamil with plenty of insight and self-assurance. Of course, he was risking very little at this point, and if things went south later today, he could always change his mind. In my mind, the day would only go badly for the minions of Hell.

It was mid-afternoon as we reached the suspected mine site, and I felt the slow pulsing of a burning void deep underground. We were in the right place. Raven's redemption pooled in the dark labyrinth below.

Lorna and I wasted no time setting up for our attack on the cave. Yseria Warric would remain outside with my two sentinel guards, and she would be in overall command of our external forces. Their job was to act as a rearguard until we returned. No way was I going to risk my young bodyguards on this Hell-diving expedition, and I wondered if Vigil Snow would risk my life in this same situation. I came to the conclusion that he was smart enough to stay out of a Hell-cave.

Lorna would accompany me into the mine with her seven royal guards, each cloaked with a hunter's amulet. They were the best fighters the dark elves had to offer and having the edge of surprise

might make all the difference. We hoped to find most of the demons close to the entrance. After eliminating them, I planned to work silently with *Fei-Krull*, my fang-knife's resident soul, until I killed whatever was producing or controlling the local horde. It was a plan, anyway. We would see how long it held together.

We moved through a natural cave opening and down an irregular-shaped tunnel until we found our first demon stretched out on the floor of a large seemingly man-made room. Our shamanic talismans worked their magic, and the man-crab demon didn't notice us in time to avoid all the long elvish blades. It was almost as if the demons were expecting us. Toward the back of the cavern, three snarling wolf-man beasts swept forward in the gloom, and a hairy, black spider-like fiend fell on us from the ceiling.

As traps go, it was well-timed.

Unfortunately for the Infernal beasts, I was hanging back, waiting for that hairy demon to drop. It met my axe while its eight legs were still eight feet short of the floor, and its head had no other option but to split, a dozen demonic eyes parting on either side of the wide blade. The spider-demon thrashed uncontrollably on the floor while the claws of the approaching wolves grew louder, tearing at the rough stone.

Turning to face the triple threat, I whipped my axe into the nearest of the beasts racing our way. The weapon struck hard, knocking it back but leaving it alive. The other two monsters veered rapidly toward the elves that were finishing off the crab-man. I drew *Fei-Krull* from its sheath on my back and leaped upon the injured wolf, quickly punching smoking holes in its head and neck.

An elf went down screaming. The rest danced away from the remaining wolf-demon pair, keeping their long blades slashing to the front. Eight against two was an excellent ratio, and we were soon left with hairy black bodies scattered all about in pools of black blood and quickly melting chunks of unreal flesh. The wounded Royal guard had lost his arm at the shoulder before being disemboweled by the scrape of razor-sharp claws. The last of his life force slipped away, and there was little we could do but catch our breath and leave a prayer.

Overall, we had been lucky. The room had a sizable, broad shape. It could easily hold forty demons, so the fact that it only held five of the

Hell-borne was a good start. The natural light was almost nonexistent, and I expected it to fall away completely as we pushed onward and downward. Fortunately, there was a consistent flow of heat coming from the dark tunnel opening on the far side of the room. We could feel it and see it as if it were a dim red light. Following it to the source would be the simplest part of the afternoon.

I spoke to Lorna, "This seems awfully quiet. How deep does this cave go?"

"We never made it past this room before," she said with some surprise. "Last time we were here, there were more than twenty waiting for us, and half of those dropped on us from the ceiling. It was a slaughter."

"Okay, follow me. Let's get to the heart of this cave."

We followed the heat trail into a gradually descending tunnel. The passage floor was covered in the residue of numerous demon tracks, all consistent in their outward direction. At the first intersection, the demonic traffic showed only one option, straight-ahead. Around each corner to the left and right, I sensed a smoldering void. Ahead of me, I felt the stench of more pure evil. I pointed to the left and right for the elves, indicating the danger, and then I sprinted straight ahead across the intersection.

The ambush was sprung. A shriek assaulted our ears as a pair of hairy black hell-spiders, each the size of a large dog, dropped from each side tunnel and scurried after me. I spun with my axe to face them as the elves rushed the spiders from behind.

The ensuing exchange was pure chaos. Long hairy legs flailed and hooked me as a set of venomous fangs lurched forward, clamping onto my heavy vambrace. My axe responded by parting the glowing eyes of another Hell-spider, and a third was climbing the backs of the first two as a spear passed through it, piercing the body of the first. The fourth—and last—was pinned by three more spears. The demons shook hard on the blades but couldn't get free. Elven blackblades finished the scrum by dissecting the monsters, one hairy leg at a time. I hacked myself free of the first hairy spider's jaws and trimmed away a couple of hook-laden legs in the process. One claw had snagged and torn the back of my calf, catching muscle rather than tendon below it. The

severed leg continued to twitch, opening my wound further as we finished off all of the spiders, and finally, yanked it out.

We checked each other for wounds before moving on. Besides the jagged gash in my right leg, the steel of my left vambrace had been scratched but had held its form well under the spider's bite. A horrid liquid dripped from it. I moved my axe to catch some venom on its edge before turning my attention to another long passage ahead of us.

"Things are about to get ugly," I said to Lorna and her six remaining guards. "I can sense several more demons plus a couple stronger ones up ahead. With any luck, that means we're almost to the source."

Two demonic alphas pulsed with a commanding presence, vying with the Infernal rage emanating from the mass of Hellions ahead. There was loud and there was louder. Our mission's end patiently called for us to proceed.

It was time to scout ahead.

Creeping up the rough-hewn corridor and into a sweltering cavern, I found a home away from home for the Infernal. Heat flared, rising from a river of lava that cut off the back of the room from the front. Only a narrow bridge of lava rock allowed passage to the rear where an altar stood, protected by two monstrous and heavily armored Hell-knights. A pall of Black energy leaked from them in waves, coating the room and every demon present.

Between the Hell-knights and me, a dozen black-horned lizard-men with beady red eyes lounged. Heavily muscled, lizard-kings had long barbed tails, jagged teeth, and short, hooked claws. They were a tough-looking match for the lighter elves. They basked in the energy of their overlords and the searing heat, completely ignoring my dim presence.

Sneaking back to Lorna and her guards, I explained what we faced. Her expression sagged at the number and type of foe present. As a guardian of Bastian, she'd faced every type of demon and knew which ones to avoid. The odds weren't in our favor.

The broad cavern would be an advantage for the elves' quickness, but I suggested that they wait, charging in with their blades at the right moment.

I had never encountered these lizard-beasts before but would do

my best to distract if not kill as many as possible, leaving it up to Lorna to decide when to strike.

Back in the blistering cavern with my axe drawn, I searched for the best point of attack. Carefully sliding to my left, I ducked behind a boulder near the lava flow. Lizard-men lay scattered in front of me, the nearest only a dozen feet away, oblivious to my presence. The massive Hell-knights hadn't moved at all—more statues—and I got the feeling that the far side of the bridge was their domain. Our goal was in sight, but first demons first.

Leaping over the rock between us, I went for the first kill. My axe cut deeply into the neck of the nearest lizard fiend but didn't fully sever its head as expected. These guys were made of much sterner stuff, but they were also a bit slower to react.

Pulling my axe, I backed away from a wall of hissing beasts. All but one stood up on stocky back legs and stalked in my direction. The creature I had struck failed to rise, thrashing its life away on the overheated floor. Maybe the Hell-spider venom did some good after all.

The demons maneuvered, determined to hem me in.

Not wanting to be pinned against the lava flow on my left, I dodged quickly to my right and swung hard at the nearest upright lizard's head, catching it with a jarring blow. Its skull and my axe both shattered in the process.

Feth.

From the back of the room, I heard a hellish laugh. Something was paying attention.

Unsheathing *Fei-Krull*, I shrieked out a challenge. The lizard-men answered back with a roar; my ears rang, bullied by their total lack of respect.

Feth again.

My frustration grew as the line of lizards advanced, and my openings shrunk. I needed a break, and one finally arrived.

With the lizards' attention all focused on me, Lorna and her six remaining guards charged in. Heavy spear blades cut hard into the flanks of the beasts and severed tails. The momentum of the battle suddenly spun in our favor and gave me the chance I needed to

maneuver.

The melee was on.

I launched forward, attacking a lizard-beast that had turned to face the elves. My fang punched with ease through the side of its scaly head right before its long, ribbed tail slammed into my side, knocking me from my feet.

Another beast pounced my way, and I rolled free, back to the left and the lava. My eyes watered from the fierce heat and the flaring pain in my side.

I regained my feet in time to see an elf pulled apart by the heavy claws of two lizard-men. Two more demons sought to corner me against the lava.

Skipping forward and to my left, I delivered fast, over-handed swings to the back, head, and neck of one monster before ducking low under the claws and jaws of the other.

It dove low after me.

I swung my left arm in a block that removed several of its teeth. It wasn't the killing blow that I needed, but it bought me enough time to pivot off its line and drive *Fei-Krull* through the left side of its head.

Block first, then kill. My sentinel trainers would be proud.

The situation had improved. The few remaining lizard-men were a disorganized group thrashing out in all directions, but three of the dark elves were down. I yelled for the rest to back away, hoping to spread out the foes and give us all more room to work.

Sensing that the end was in reach, the elves dropped their heavy spears and drew their blackblades.

There were still three lizard-men alive against the five of us, but the odds shifted as a wolf-man roared across the bridge and leaped into the elves' right flank. The beast hadn't been present a minute ago. The demonic portal must have brought the Hellion through.

Feth. The fast attack stole our advantage.

Lorna fought in the middle of her elves, trying to hold a line, but the wolf-man was forcing them to fight in two different directions at once.

Being on their far left, I moved around behind the lizard-men. Dodging their ugly tails, I hit the first in the back of its head and neck.

More threads of black smoke poured into the cavern.

Dancing across to the next beast, I pulled myself up, grabbing one of its horns. As the beast bucked and wrestled my weight, *Fei-Krull* penetrated straight down through the top of its skull, driving the fiend into the floor.

The final lizard and wolf-man beast began backing towards the bridge. The two hell-knights still hadn't moved an inch from their position in front of the altar. The dark-wolf had elven blood on its jaws as it fell to pieces, blackblades striking true.

Strangely enough, the lizard-man turned its back on us, dropping to all fours and scampering in full retreat. The move was its final mistake. *Fei-Krull* pierced its spine, and I shoved it sideways into the lava flow. We watched it thrash and sink out of sight with a cloud of burnt sulfur stinging our eyes.

Who's laughing now?

For a moment, everything was quiet. We made sure all the demons on our side of the lava river were dead and took stock of our wounds. Lorna and her three remaining guards were all severely gashed by the demons' claws, and one had a hideous bite mark on his shoulder. It didn't look good. There wasn't any point in them continuing to fight in that condition, so I ordered them all back out of the cave to safety. My battle rage was peaking, and I didn't want them in the way.

My wounds weren't life-threatening: a spider hook in the back of the leg, probably a broken rib or two from the whip of a lizard tail, and my usual battered left arm. The ribs grated as I breathed, a sign that meant I was still alive. Gripping my war-blade tightly, I didn't feel any pain at all.

This was my fight. As soon as Lorna and her guards were clear of the cavern, I charged across the lava rock bridge.

The two hell-knights stood tall, at least a foot taller than me. They were the only demons left in the cave. As I stepped off the bridge, they drew longswords sized to match their imposing will. Dressed head to toe in deep red plate armor, they wielded their blades with both hands. I had no intention of trying to block those weapons. The breast of each knight carried the emblem of a blood-black carrion bird. At least, I think it was a bird. I didn't take a long look.

Fei-Krull felt light in my hand, almost a part of me, as I stalked left,

trying to determine how coordinated these two might be. The knight on my right seemed to hesitate and didn't keep in line with its evil twin. I bounded straight into the leftmost warrior as its sword arced forward.

It was far too slow.

My weapon exploded into its forehead, right through its plated helm, without any resistance. I pushed away quickly, ducking to the right as a colossal sword took off the Hell-knight's head, obviously intending to get mine too.

I was impressed. The rightmost Hell-knight had used its cohort as bait. Sure, it had failed, but I gave it respect for going straight for the win.

As the heavy sword passed above me, I stepped into the opening behind the demon's massive follow-through and jammed *Fei-Krull* into its right ear hole. That had to hurt.

The Hellion spun around counterclockwise, trying to meet me as I circled behind it, but I was inside its guard. My next strike went into its chest, right through the sigil of the carrion bird. It lurched back, and I punched the third thrust through its faceplate, hoping to hit an eye.

Black clouds billowed from its wounds. Finally, it staggered and fell, smoldering, face down on the hot cave floor. The other knight and its weapon were already burning darkly, turning to ash.

There was nothing left to fight.

The Infernal altar was constructed of solid lava rock in the shape of an archway. Inside the arch sat the skull of a giant vulture on a tarnished silver chalice. Next to it was an oddly familiar-looking short sword.

The evil skull was crushed under my boot; its fragments kicked into the lava flow below. Just holding it made me want to retch. I grabbed the chalice and sword. Both appeared man-made, and each was a clue.

Reaching the opening of the return passage, I rested and watched the evil cavern disintegrate before me. The altar began to crumble and melt; its demon birthing days were over. The narrow bridge did more of the same, cracking apart and tumbling into the lava flow, while the silver chalice and the short sword in my hands remained unaffected.

My battle rage leaked out onto the cavern floor, and exhaustion

began to take its place, bringing with it a bushel full of pain. It was time to go.

As I staggered out into the corridor, I heard the approach of my trio of guards, with Yseria leading the way.

“Ara, so glad to see that you—survived.” Yseria looked me over twice to be sure. “Lorna asked that we find you or at least what’s left of you.”

Hicks and Gunner carried torches and remained silent as they tried to make sense of the scene behind me.

“The Hell-knights weren’t a match for my *Kjaira*,” I coughed and winced proudly. “But those damned demon lizards were tough. One even broke my axe with its face.”

Gunner chuckled at that. “That’s why I like to swing the heavier version.”

Hicks pointed to my new sword, “You seem to have found a replacement.”

“I’m planning on talking with Palypsos about that as soon as we get back. Now, if you don’t mind me leaning on you a bit, let’s get out of here before I’m completely baked.”

By the time we emerged from the cave, news of our success was already on its way back to Bastian. The deaths of the Hell-knights had been felt outside with the lifting of the pall. It would leave the rogue demons in the area in uncontrolled confusion. The dark elves now had a great opportunity to hunt them down before they scattered to the winds. With the Infernal altar gone, there wouldn’t be any further replacements to haunt the Valley of Bastian.

At this point, I was weighing the need to breathe with the amount of pain it caused.

Yseria took note. “We saved you a cart. I don’t think you’ll make the long walk back on your own.”

Ducking her head under my arm, she led me toward a simple wooden cart, complete with a stocky pair of harnessed goats.

“You’re right; I won’t,” I replied. “And neither will you.”

Bar Sinister

Back to war

“Memet, where is my blade, *Exile*?”

Memet was no longer seated by my right side but had shifted to the far left of *Rei-Seeck*. My war-blade was no longer embedded in the bar to my right. I hadn’t been paying much attention to it lately with the beautiful death-demon in our midst.

Who would have thought that a soul of Death could be so enticing? Well, we all would, Infernal power being what it was.

Our bewitching barfly replied, “Its incessant howling was getting on my nerves, so I asked Memeton to remove it.”

“As she says,” said Memet. “It is currently indisposed, but we’ll get it back eventually.”

“Indisposed? Eventually? Where did it go?” I howled.

“Where it belongs. Back to war.”

Chapter 17

Demon in Exile

More than true to his word, King Ylamil showed his gratitude for our success. He officially ended the exile of his daughter Raven and outlawed any rituals of sacrifice that the shamans might have practiced. I carried a letter for Raven from her father detailing the new situation and asking her to return home.

The King also presented me with a pair of necklaces, each adorned with a matching golden disc to replace the silver amulets that Raven and I both wore. I tucked these safely away for later. He also permanently assigned Yseria Warric as my Bastian Royal Guard, giving her the option to travel with me back to Berykholt.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that last little gift. Yseria and I had plenty in common. We were loners and both the last of our line. From our brief time together, I sensed a kindred soul. She carried a loss, one hidden deep beneath the surface, and the need to act lest she scream her pain to the world at large. To survive each day, she carried a challenge where I carried hope. Perhaps King Ylamil thought we were a good match or that Yseria's presence would lessen the sting of Raven's return to Bastian.

Who knows the mind of a king? I barely knew my own.

Khamros brought me down to the lowest levels of the castle to meet with Palypsos again. I delivered the chalice collected from the portal altar. It was an artifact for demonic rituals. Perhaps, through further study, Palypsos could discern a clue to its original owner and how it ended up on the doorstep of Bastian.

According to Palypsos, the silver chalice was centuries old and had

been used to capture the souls and blood of those sacrificed in the name of Infernal deities, such was the currency that flowed through the Veil. The chalice held the residue of many thousands of souls and would take the shamans a lifetime to decipher.

The unusual sword had all of my attention. Its stout blade was two feet long and at least three inches wide. The Bastian Castle armorer called it a hand glaive or a broadsword. It weighed almost the same as Hicks' sentinel axe, and its balance was as exceptional as it was ancient. On the hilt, the armorer noted a forge mark from a kingdom thought to exist over a thousand years ago. There were also some unrecognizable runes etched into the blade itself.

Despite its age, the edge of the glaive was free of damage or defects. It reminded me of the sword from my vivid dream last month, the one raging in the hellish bar. In my dream, it had been as thunderous as a berserk demon. Here in my hands, it was silent, almost cold, content.

It was late in the evening as we scrutinized the items with Palypsos. My three guards waited back in my room. I had been patched up, but my body ached from misuse and fatigue. Still, I needed as much information as possible before heading home in the morning—*home*, funny that I never really used that word before, even during my life in Lockrun.

Palypsos lifted my newfound glaive for a reading. He wasn't going to pierce his ear with that three-inch wide blade. Instead, I held the hilt while he ran his thumb slowly along one edge, carefully drawing a small amount of blood as he went. Again, we sat back and waited for him to breathe.

A wicked raspy voice arrived first, "Hal-Noire, in *Exile*, beckons you forth."

"Who is Hal-Noire?" I asked.

"One you have defeated, *Firefanged*. An Infernal House gifted in *Exile*."

Firefanged. This time I didn't jump. I was beginning to sense where this was leading.

"Gifted to whom?" I asked.

"*Exile* was given to you. Your House would not possess me

otherwise.”

“Given by who?”

“The Master of the Infernal Cycle, to which you are bound.”

Okay, I may have flinched at that remark. As far as I knew, I was bound to the Order of the Vigil.

“What is *Firefanged*?”

“Another gift. A title of the exiled. Use it well before the Cycle turns.” The unreal voice faded away to a final hiss.

I stood, removing the sword from Palypsos’ grasp. He slowly awakened.

We both did.

Firefanged. An Infernal gift to an Infernal House of War. Feth.

I looked over at Khamros, trying not to shake. “You understand any of that?” I asked, really hoping that he hadn’t.

Palypsos answered, “It is quite simple. The sword’s name is *Exile*. I suspect that the Hellionic script stamped along the blade also denotes such. The glaive carries a powerful demonic prisoner of war by the name of Hal-Noire. I don’t recognize that name, but your Order might be able to assist further.”

“Any idea why it was lying on that Infernal altar? It didn’t seem to be a part of the ritual,” I said.

“Well, you are right about that. It’s purely an instrument of war. It seems to me that it was placed there as a gift specifically for you.”

A demon in Exile. It wasn’t a gift; it was a message. Something was owed beyond the Veil.

###

Returning to my room, I found Yseria Warric waiting outside the door.

“Yseria, I’m glad you are here. Will you be joining us on our trip back to Berykholt?”

She leaned back against the door and looked up into my eyes. Her usual air of challenge had been replaced by uncertainty. The door at her back remained closed.

“What is there for me in Colivar?” she whispered.

“I don’t know. Maybe a chance to find your place without all the challenges and duels that Bastian has to offer.”

“Ara, what would you know about that?”

“Lorna mentioned that you were the last of your line, but you aren’t that much older than me. We’re both houseless, and I know what it means to take on anyone or anything just to survive. I know what it’s like to feel disconnected, abandoned, not part of any place, or claimed by anyone else. Feth, I don’t even have a family name, but I also know that that can change. At least it will change, eventually.”

Yseria raised an eyebrow, “What has changed for you? You look like you’re doing your best to survive and failing miserably at it.”

“Well, you are right about that. I’m barely hanging on and sometimes not so well. If we get to know each other better, I might show you some of my scars. I feel ashamed of them. I feel like I should have been better at defending myself or been treated better at times. But what has changed is that I now have a purpose and a calling in life. And because of that, I’m no longer disconnected from others.”

She continued searching for something in my eyes, “And what is your purpose?”

“To protect those that I love and respect, to protect those that I choose to bring into my life, and to banish the evil that threatens us all. Sure, I can perceive myself as only a weapon to kill demons, but I have to be more than that.”

What was it about this dark elf that allowed my thoughts and words to flow so clearly?

“What about you, Yseria? You, too, are a weapon wielded by kings. Who do you protect?” I said.

She spoke honestly, “Myself. If I don’t, then no one will.”

I sighed, “It gets old, doesn’t it? It almost gets too hard to breathe sometimes just thinking about it.” I had the woman’s complete attention. “This brings me back to my original question: Will you be coming with us? No, wait, let me say that differently. Yseria, would you please come with us to Colivar? You would be under my protection, no matter what, just as I would be under yours.”

After a moment, she pushed away from the door and looked down at her boots. Then she looked up into my eyes again and nodded silently.

I checked in on my other two guards before getting some rest. “So,

how's your trip been so far? You both ready for the long hike back home?"

"We're good," replied Gunner. "You look a little worse for wear, though. How's your leg?"

"They've sewed me up tight, and I've got plenty of clean bandages for the road. It's my ribs that bother me the most. Most of my left side is one big bruise, and the doctor here thinks that at least one rib is broken. It hurts just to breathe right now."

"I think we'll be alright hanging out here for another day, don't ya think?" said Gunner. "We'd get some time to check out the sights."

Hicks explained Gunner's line of thought, "And by sights, he means the dark elf women. Have you seen the way they move?"

I chuckled gently, paying homage to a lizard-king's tail, "Sure, and I've also seen how they fight. Not sure I'd like to date someone that can carve me up that easily if I get out of line. The good news is that we'll have some company on the way back. Yseria Warric will be joining us. She's become my official bodyguard, as a favor from the King. She'll be under my protection, same as you, so please keep your eyes and your hands to yourself."

Hicks blushed at the news after an elbow by Gunner.

"Ha, I knew it!" I said. "While we're on the road, please treat the dark elf like your sister. It might be difficult, but let's not be too distracted by the gracefulness of her form."

###

Lorna was up with the dawn to see us off. Still nursing her wounds from the cave fight, she wanted to give me a message for her distant sister. She also offered us a dozen dark elves as an escort past the demon infested caves to the south. We had cleared most of that area on the way into Bastian, but no sense in taking a chance during our first day out. The demons had scattered in all directions, and the elves still had plenty of unleashed rogues to eliminate.

Yseria led the way, with zero complaints from the rest of us. Her dark leathers fit her body perfectly, but I was simply admiring the beautiful blackblade strapped across her back. Most of the time, anyway.

We cleared the first mountain pass with little talk and plenty of uphill

exertion. The rough terrain pounded incessantly on my cracked ribs, and all my efforts were focused on treading and breathing as carefully as possible.

Our elven escort reversed back toward Bastian after about ten miles, and I could feel our small group relax a bit. We had at least four days of hiking ahead of us, and I wanted to build a few bonds on the way. As far as I could tell, the area around us was clear; no Hell-borne hunting parties were waiting in ambush. I called a brief halt.

“By my estimate, we’ve got about ninety miles to go and most of a long day ahead of us. Any bets on whether we cover another twenty miles before making camp tonight?”

Yseria just scoffed.

Gunner nodded in her direction.

“What she said,” said Hicks.

“Perfect, Gunner, the goat, will take point and move out double-time. He’ll switch with Hicks this afternoon. The rest of us will follow in a relaxed line. I’ll be on overwatch. Yseria will bring up the rear to make sure nobody is left behind. The first one to call a halt gets to sit the first watch tonight.” I had a feeling that that was going to be me.

###

Another eight hours and close to thirty miserable miles later, I called a halt just a few miles short of the narrow, wooded valley. We were all winded and tired; my jaw was numb from clenching it so long. I picked a defensible spot near a large boulder at the base of a small hill. Hicks scavenged wood for a fire while Gunner hunted for a stream to refill our canteens. I claimed the first watch and rested with my back against one of the softer rocks. My left arm ached, my left side was on fire, and the calf of my right leg felt wet.

Yseria sat down and began changing the bandage on my leg. We had both noticed the blood miles ago but had continued our fast march through the Everest mountains. The weather was cool and dry, helping us make terrific progress, and I was eager to make it back.

“Thank you for helping me with that.” I handed her a clean wrap from my pack. “At this point, I’m not sure I could do it myself.”

“Your breathing is uneven. How are your ribs?”

“I’m hoping that if I sit completely still, they’ll stop complaining, but

so far, no joy.”

Yseria finished rewrapping my calf. She leaned in close, her lips only inches from mine. Our noses touched and she hopped to her feet. “Just what I thought, there’s a hint of blood on your breath. Stand up for a moment and pull off your armor.”

“Okay.” I struggled to my feet. The wind was causing my weary eyes to water. “I think I’m gonna need some help with the armor.”

Having layers of leather and mail to painfully lever over my head, I finally pulled up the left side of my undershirt. My skin was a canvas of purple, yellow, and dark red.

Yseria grabbed a jar of ointment from her pack and began applying it to my damaged side. It felt frigid, and after a moment, the shooting pain subsided to a dull ache. My breathing eased.

“Thank you for that,” I whispered, quickly pulling down my shirt and wiping my eyes.

“It won’t work so well if you are active, so try not to move around too much tonight while you are on watch.”

No, I hadn’t forgotten the first watch. “When did you kill your first demon?”

I caught Yseria off guard, and she struggled to look me in the eye.

I wasn’t sure what she saw there, but she finally answered, “Last year, during our first battle at the Hell-gate cave. I killed three demons, but it was all for naught. I was just trying to save as many companions as I could as we fought our way out of the ambush. We lost thirty elves that day, and I didn’t get so much as a scratch. Master Andarion lost his younger brother in the melee.”

I could feel the woman’s crushing pain. “Please forgive me for asking, but what was his name?”

“Jordarion,” she sobbed. “Jordy. He saved me during the battle, trading his life for mine. How dare he?” She swiped at the tears rolling down her face.

I reached out to take her wet hand. “Yseria, you carry the scars of battle far better than I. To make up for my weakness, I’ll let you help me get back into my armor.”

“Please call me Yser.”

“Yser, did Jordy call you that?”

She bit her lip and slowly nodded, her eyes far away.

###

The following day, I decided on a more sensible pace. The game trails through the wooded valley and around the glacier made for easier going. We were also generally descending during the second half of the day. When we camped that night, we found ourselves only thirty miles from home, and I was in much less pain than the previous evening.

We rested in our original 'boulders below the broken cliff' campsite. If only there were a ready stack of firewood, it would be perfect. A pack of wolves roamed in the distance to the south, but I was more concerned about other sightings. Plenty of rogues had scattered from the bounds of Bastian, and I knew that there were dozens of inviting caves on this side of the mountain range.

As usual, claiming the first watch, I tucked myself in next to the sleeping threesome to stay warm. Hicks would switch off with me a few hours before dawn.

The wolf pack lingered in the area but didn't move in our direction. They were persistent with their howling as if trying to scare up some prey. Suddenly, their call was answered by a distant twisted screech. Something vile had come out of its cave not that far from our camp. The wolves howling stopped, signaling that it was my turn to hunt.

Before leaving the comfort of our sheltered spot, I woke up Hicks. His eyes went wide at the otherworldly noise in the distance. I pointed to the top of the nearest boulder and quietly asked him to take the watch.

It was time to test *Exile*. I moved rapidly southeast through the night; all my pain was forgotten. The wolf pack had run from the area along with any other nearby predators or prey. A mile from our campsite, I heard the Hellion screeching and scrambling down the nearest hill. I found an open patch of ground and waited for the demon to arrive. I drew the glaive from its leather sheath.

Oddly, the hellish screeching stopped, replaced by an insistent rustling of movement through the underbrush. A ten count later, a creature hopped and landed at the edge of my clearing, half-man, half-raptor. It looked me over with the head of an eagle, long talons

pointing outward from each side. It must have been expecting someone else. The sight of me drew the beast back into a screeching rage.

It charged forward.

I side-stepped its beeline attack and swung *Exile* in a backhanded arc, cleaving off one of its talons at the shoulder.

The beast reacted, turning with its beak open wide. It had rows of razor-like teeth and a bite that could easily sever my arm.

I brought the blade around and down through its head, bisecting its skull and ending its unnatural existence.

The neighborhood was utterly quiet as the kill washed over me. There was a power there, a fury to be collected and used, and it scared me. I'd felt it in the Hell-cave and automatically fed it into my next swing. Now, standing there alone in the dead of night, it stood me up like a statue waiting to fall upon its next victim.

A tingle in my arm roused me back to my senses. My broadsword absorbed the black blood coating its blade until it was perfect and pristine.

The dead demon didn't have any ears, so I plucked a few feathers for proof of the kill. It was on our side of the mountains, so I figured that I should get credit for it.

Returning to camp, I found my three companions wide awake. Hicks waved to me from atop his rock. Gunner was stoking the fire while Yseria did some stretching nearby.

"Eager to get going?" I asked them. "Last day on the trail if we get an early start, and we'll be back with two days to spare before our promotion ceremony."

"And a barracks full of smelly recruits, which sounds quite wonderful right now if there's still a bed with my name on it," said Gunner.

"And a bath," said Hicks.

"I hear ya," I said. "So, which one of you is going to take the company's alpha position at the graduation?"

"Does it matter?" said Hicks. "I mean, it's Gunner's for the taking, but being a sentinel isn't about how we measure up against each other. It's how we measure up against the beasts."

"Well said, Brandon. And you're right about Gunner. With his

combination of speed and power, I don't see any other recruit beating him. With a heavy axe, he would have matched up better than the dark elves against the lizard-men that we fought in that cave. Of course, there were some other demons there where you might have fared better than Gunner. The spider demons, for example, were an interesting challenge. They had legs, fangs, venom, and cunning, and they could run the ceiling as fast as I could run the floor. And twelve eyes. Did I mention their twelve eyes?"

"No, but we saw their carcasses, or at least what was left of those," said Gunner.

"Another thing to point out," I said, sitting down next to Yseria. "When we arrive in Berykholt, your records will officially reflect two demon kills each. When you graduate, you will be elevated to the rank of full-blooded sentinel. Vigil Snow will likely be confirming your kills as part of the promotion ceremony."

"How will he do that? I mean, he wasn't there, and we've got nothing to show." Hicks always had a sharp mind for details.

"Well, he will examine you."

"He can confirm that we killed a demon just by looking at us?" asked Gunner.

"Well, I can see that you have, so I'm sure that he can too. He also might ask you to confirm it verbally first. He can see the truth in another person's words." I followed the blank looks on their faces, "Killing a demon changes you. You both look different, cleaner, brighter, sharper to my eyes. That must be why the Order makes the distinction between a full-blooded sentinel and a sentinel-adept, but I still don't understand all the nuances."

"The Order judges everything by kills, not skills," said Gunner. "Like that scout pin you wear. You haven't even completed recruit training, and yet you earned the rank of scout in a single night." He wasn't complaining.

"Exactly. One last thing that you both need to know: Yseria here has killed three demons, so don't overlook her as a capable fighter or a friend—and whatever you do, don't ever look her in the eye."

Ouch! The comment earned me a punch in the arm from a certain dark elf, and we all burst into laughter. In my sorry state, she could

have done far worse.

###

We took our final rest at Drake's Rock in the late afternoon, following another sore but thankfully uneventful day of travel. The rock had taken on a new meaning for me over the past couple of weeks. Where it had first signified tragedy and commitment to duty, its familiar form was now a landmark for home. I relayed what I knew of the events pertaining to the solitary boulder and how it got its name.

My breathing wasn't as even as it should have been, but I had a few more things on my mind. "I seem to be continually trading stress for pain these days, and I'll need some downtime until our promotion. Please remember, I've got a training spot for you once Sergeant Masterson lets you go, and if you know of any other new adepts that show promise and a touch of masochism, throw them my way."

"Well, there was one very skilled guy that graduated in spring class, outstanding alpha-level, but he's got an older brother that's a bit too dominant and mouthy," said Hicks.

"Was the older brother named Keil?" I asked, rolling my eyes.

"You've met Sevin?" said Gunner. "He graduated as the spring class alpha in spite of the fact that his brother couldn't button it up for one minute."

"His mouth or his pants?" I said.

"Both!" they replied simultaneously.

"Are they a package deal? And can Keil hold an axe?"

"He's not alpha-level, but he's solid. If you're going to be training us, I don't see why he couldn't keep up," said Hicks. "It might even do him some good."

"Fair enough. Thanks for the advice. One last thing, please try to keep events of the past fortnight under your hat, at least the reasons for it and the results. I'll make a full report to Masterson and ask for his discretion as well. Vigil Snow will need to decide what to do with everything we found there."

Well, almost everything.

Chapter 18

Connections Restored

Dusk had settled in by the time we entered the town of Berykholt. The journey's end raised our spirits and sped our final strides. Our first stop was the recruits' barracks to return Hicks and Gunner and to check in with Masterson. I had vowed to return the recruits in one piece and wanted to get a receipt.

The sergeant crowed, "Well, look who's back! And with all their limbs attached as promised. Recruits, you look like Hell. Please return to your bunks after a long, soap-filled experience in the bathhouse."

"Sergeant, could I brief you later on the events of the past fortnight and the honorable actions of your two recruits?" My uneven tone was proof enough that I was completely spent.

Masterson seemed more than relieved at our survival, and he let me off with only one question, "Who's the dark elf girl?"

"My bodyguard."

We hurried out the door. Yseria stuck to me like glue amid all the unfamiliarity of Berykholt. As we reached the castle gate, we were met by Captain Glenn and Doctor Loeb. They had obviously been waiting just for us.

"Ara, so good to see you back safe and sound," said Glenn.

Loeb was wearing his doctor's hat. "Captain, I highly doubt anything about Ara's trip was safe, and I certainly wouldn't say that he was sound. You can see he's a bit bent, tilted even. He also has a slight limp, and if I'm not mistaken, a tinge of blood on his breath."

I was too tired to confirm or deny the doctor's words.

Yseria answered for me, "Ara just hiked a hundred miles through

the Everest range with broken ribs and fresh stitching up the back of his calf. The blood you smell, well, my best guess is that his left lung is also damaged.”

“Gentlemen,” I wheezed. “My new bodyguard, Yseria Warric.” I hoped that satisfied their curiosity. It’s all I had for the moment.

“Yseria, I’m Captain Glenn, and this is Doctor Loeb of the Order of the Vigil, attached to Vigil Snow. Pleased to meet you.”

I rasped out my priorities, “Doctor, I will be visiting you later tonight. Any idea where Raven might be at the moment?”

It was dinner time at the keep. I didn’t want to walk in filthy from the long journey, wearing dried demon’s blood, but I was told that Snow was expecting our imminent arrival in the dining hall. It seems that the scouts were keeping an eye out for us and had sent a runner over here as soon as we were sighted on the outskirts of Berykholt.

“Good evening, all,” said Glenn, leading us into the dining room. I scanned the room and quickly found Vigil Snow and Lynda. Everyone was dressed in their fine dinner clothes. A beautiful young woman wearing an elegant blue dress stood up next to Lynda. Her eyes were shiny gray as they met mine. Her dark-toned complexion highlighted her deep red lips.

“Rae,” I coughed.

Making a real effort not to stumble, I walked around the dining table to reach her. I was wrecked and in pain. Andarion stood next to her. *Where had he come from?*

“You recovered,” I hated my harsh-sounding voice.

The scent of Rae’s exhaustion was gone, replaced with an exotic combination of roses and myrrh. She smelled like a princess. She nodded, tears rolling down her healthy cheeks.

“You—you’re beautiful,” I stumbled, half-wits be damned.

She blushed.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It’s only been two days since I last slept. I have a letter for you from your father.” I reached into my travel pack.

“Thank you,” she said.

Her gray eyes wouldn’t leave mine, her face a mask of concern. I didn’t dare touch her.

“Yseria Warric is my new bodyguard and friend,” I said to all

present. "It's good to be back. Please excuse me while I get cleaned up."

"Ara, welcome back," said Vigil Snow. "We've given you the entire second floor in the keep next door. We hope you find it to your liking."

Andarion led us out, with Lynda and Raven following. Across a small courtyard, we entered the keep for visiting dignitaries. It was larger than the Vigil's own. I staggered up a short but challenging flight of stairs and into a spacious living room with five doors on either side of the common living area.

"We moved all your remaining gear and clothes into here," Andy said, indicating the first door on the right. "Rae is in here, first door on the left, and I'm in the room next to her."

My bedroom was similar but even grander than the last. I still had a view of the courtyard.

"This is great. I would like Yseria to have the room next to mine. Lynda," I said, turning to meet her warm green eyes and worried expression. "It is so good to see you. Would you please make sure that Yseria has everything that she needs tonight? Right now, I need some help out of my armor and into a good bath."

I may have been swaying by then.

Andy and Yser helped get me free of my armor and weapons. Andy walked me into one of the two shared bathrooms and got me sorted in a hot tub of water. He was soon back with a clean set of clothes and a rough towel.

"You've had a rough trip," he said as I dried off.

I nodded. "I've got some things to show you when we get a chance."

"You've shown me plenty already," he quipped with a sympathetic look, unmasking his feelings of shock.

With a flinch, I realized what I had done in my stupor.

"Lock the door, please." I quickly pulled on my shirt.

The soft gray cotton felt great after days in chafing armor and rough wool but did little to relieve the discomfort that I felt at that moment. I finished getting dressed, my eyes unable to look anywhere but the floor.

Finally, I looked at Andy with a grimace. "I'm sorry. You weren't supposed to see all that. Please keep it to yourself. Orders of Vigil

Snow and all.”

“Well, feth it all, Ara.” Andy was having a bit of trouble as things sank in.

At this point, so was I, especially with the sinking part; my head was beginning to spin, and my eyesight was running darker than normal. “I better see Doctor Loeb now. Would you ask him to meet me in my room?”

Loeb arrived shortly, carrying a tray of food for Yseria and me. Yser had made use of the other bath. She wore a simple, clean shift while her leathers and underclothes were being washed. Doctor Loeb placed the food on a table in the living room, and we went into my room and closed the door.

I pulled off my shirt and showed him the rib damage. He applied his own smellier version of ointment and handed me back my shirt. Then he smeared another medicine on the back of my calf and wrapped it.

“You’re exhausted,” he said. “Eat and lie down. Don’t get out of bed tomorrow. We’ll have your food sent up.”

I didn’t have the strength to disagree.

###

I awoke early the next morning with plenty on my mind. The gentle snoring of Andarion rolled from a large chair near my bed. A tepid dawn light showed through my window, and a cool morning breeze stirred the air of the room.

My thanks to Zephyr for waking me from the dead.

My head ached, but my brain seemed to be working again. I nudged Andy, giving him the sign for food and water. He left and returned quietly, with a tray and Vigil Snow. Another early riser, Snow was already up for breakfast.

“Thank you, Andy, and please stay,” I said. “There is much for you to hear too.”

Andarion remained standing by the door.

“Vigil Snow, please forgive me if I don’t get up, but Doctor’s orders.”

I spent the next hour eating and relaying what I found in and around Bastian and our success in destroying the demon portal there. I gave a brief recount of the contributions of Hicks and Gunner and the status of Yseria Warric as my bodyguard. Andarion knew her well and gave me

a questioning look when I brought her up.

"It appears that certain realms have begun to use the hellspawn as a weapon to meet their political goals. That is the first I have ever heard of a demon portal being planted in a neighboring realm. It's an evil way to declare and fight a war," said Snow.

"King Ylamil said much the same to me. The dark elves in Bastian are still investigating and considering their response." I left out the details of my visits with Palypsos, wanting to digest what I had learned. I reached into my travel pack and pulled out some slightly moldy looking feathers.

"I took these off a raptor demon about thirty miles north of here. It didn't have any ears."

"You will be given credit and compensated for all of your kills, as will Hicks and Gunner. It will make a nice promotion ceremony gift for the two of them," declared Snow. "The service that you provided to Bastian and the knowledge that you brought back with you is invaluable. I must send a report to the King in Maidenhall informing him of the new potential threat."

I finished our conversation with a request, "Please make sure that Raven and Yseria have access to my funds, and please ask Lynda to stop by when she gets a chance."

After Snow left, I asked Andy to close the door. "Last night, I passed out before I got to talk with Raven about how things turned out. The King rescinded her Decree of Exile. She is welcome home in Bastian. She will be safe there."

Andy nodded, "The King's letter explained the situation fully. We are forever indebted to you for what you have done, Ara."

From my travel pack, I removed a single black talisman and handed it back to Andarion. "Thank you for lending me this. It made a great difference for us, and I don't think that Sentinel Gunner Trew will ever get over being called 'the goat.'"

"It was the least that I could do, Ara." Andarion looped it around his neck. He'd seemed anxious before, but now he relaxed.

"Your connection to your family is restored?"

"Yes, you could tell?" he answered.

"I could feel the difference when you placed it around your neck."

I pulled out the two golden disc talismans that were given to me by King Ylamil. "What are these? And why did the King present them to me?"

Andy's eyes went wide in surprise. "Why is simple. You helped save our city and ended a tremendous threat to his line. What they are is not so easy to explain. The silver amulet that you wear is a shamanic device of protection for the House of Ylamil that connects you to Raven and the rest of us. It provides all of us that wear it a faint connection, as well as the subtle cloaking effect that you have experienced first-hand. While the talismans that most of us wear are black, the silver color of yours indicates a gift from the King and thus can be used to seal a betrothal.

"These golden discs are relics of an older age. On one level, they seal a permanent bond that lasts until one of the bearers dies. They have been worn by the Kings of Ylamil for dozens of generations. King Ylamil and his wives shared this set, but now that he is a widower, the devices await a new pairing. The fact that he has given them away means he has no plans for extending the line himself. Honestly, part of me is shocked by his action."

"So, House Ylamil just lost a relic of huge importance?"

"A good question. Another significant effect of the pair is to magically bind upon the wearer permanent, unquestionable status as a member of House Ylamil. That way, if a King died before his Queen, she would remain as the undisputed head of the House for her remaining years. The avarice and scheming of our kind were thus abated."

"You're saying that I would become Ara Ylamil if I wore one of these?" I didn't try to hide my surprise.

"Only if paired with another person. And both would then be considered Ylamil without question. A House for the houseless."

"Thank you for explaining," I said, my mouth going dry at the thought of such a huge commitment. "I think that I would prefer to create my own House first before joining another."

Andarion nodded, watching me wrap them up. He placed the talismans safely into my chest in the corner.

The sun was up now.

“Andy, do you think that Raven is awake?”

He answered with a smile, “She was up half the night sitting in this most uncomfortable chair before I sent her to bed.”

“About my scars,” I said. “I’ve shown them to Rae, but no one else. I feel ashamed and embarrassed by the stigma, but after my trip to Bastian, I think that I have a better understanding of the Vigil’s intent.”

Rolling carefully out of bed, I headed for my weapon rack.

“This is *Exile*,” I said, holding out my ancient broadsword. “Notice the runes pressed into the blade. They signify a soul trapped within the weapon. A great and vile soul. Am I such a weapon?”

And here Andy answered warmly, “You have such tremendous decisions to make and foes to conquer in the days ahead.”

###

Yseria relieved Andarion of his bodyguard duties a short while later. She was clean, smelling of amber and the polished, rugged leather that she wore. I would find her some more comfortable clothes. I offered the chair by my bed after she checked my bandages.

“Did you get enough rest last night?” I asked. “I bet Hicks and Gunner are still out cold in their beds today.”

“Are you speaking as my bodyguard or as my friend?” she said.

I could feel her anxiety as she tried to sort out her situation and surroundings. “Both,” I replied. “And please let me know if you need anything at all.”

“I will, and I did, sleep well, that is. It seems safe enough around here. Are you sure that you need a bodyguard?”

“Have I ever looked like I can take care of myself?”

“Point taken.” She had a pretty smile. Her bedside manner alone made me grateful for her decision to accompany me to Colivar.

“You’ve spoken with Andarion? How did it go?”

I sensed a flicker of pain, and her smile fled.

“Sorry,” I said. *Feth*.

“No need to be sorry, Ara. It has been a long time—long enough that Andy and I should both be over the pain of losing Jordy. We need to move on with our lives.”

From what I gathered, the dark elves held terribly strong attachments, and sometimes, you had to break the bone for it to heal. I

hoped that Yseria's new path would allow that healing to happen.

I finally dozed off, napping until Lynda and Raven walked in later that morning.

Their effect on me was immediate. I quickly climbed out of bed—too quickly—ignoring the pain in my side. There's something about the sight of two beautiful women that bolsters one's strength or at least one's dignity. I was still leaning a bit, favoring my side, and fighting off the vertigo for getting up too fast, but I tried to offer a brave face. I gave them both a gentle hug and maybe held Raven a bit longer than necessary.

She looked great, wearing her black leather outfit. Her dark hair was shiny and pulled back with a pale clip. The color of health had returned to her face, and I could see the leather thong of her silver talisman around her neck.

I held her hand. "I'm sorry for not talking with you last night. It seems the journey home from Bastian took more out of me than I thought."

"You left us without saying goodbye," she whispered.

Underneath her beautiful and hale appearance, I could still sense the broken heart that she carried. Another heart slow to heal. This one, I wouldn't break any further.

"You were with me the whole way," I offered, weakly, touching where the amulet rested against my chest.

And here, Lynda helped me again, changing the subject, "The promotion ceremony is the day after tomorrow. Let's all plan to visit a tailor or two, so we have something presentable to wear for the occasion. Dignitaries will be arriving today and tomorrow to attend the ceremony."

"Like who?" I asked.

"Well, the Duke of Stonnberg and his escort will be riding in later today. My brother Meryl will be among them. They'll all be staying on the floor above you. This keep is mainly reserved for visiting dignitaries."

"I wonder if a Colivarian duke outranks a Bastian Princess." I squeezed Raven's hand. "And speaking of which, your family sends their respects. Your sister Lorna was badly hurt during the fight at the

demon gate, but she made it a point to pass along her love for you before we left. And your father, well I think he wants to see you again soon. You read his letter and his decrees?"

Raven nodded, looking over my shoulder at Yseria with suspicion.

"You seem to be awfully familiar with your new bodyguard," she said.

"Well, after our days together on the road, she is also my friend." I saw Lynda's eyes go wide with a slight shake of her head.

I suddenly yearned for the days when I only had to worry about the whims of an eleven-year-old girl in Lockrun.

Lynda cut in again, "My father said that Vigil Thorn would be arriving tomorrow. Thorn's usually too busy fighting in the East to pay attention to training or promotion ceremonies, so this is a big event. She'll be up on the fourth floor of this keep with her sentinel escort."

"Any idea why she's suddenly turning up?" The thought of yet another Vigil being around made me more than uneasy.

"She may be short on men and looking to recruit some alpha-level fighters," Lynda guessed.

"Or maybe some seasoned sentinel-scouts?" The thought of hunting demons in the mountains or the jungles of Colivar held a tempting simplicity for me.

Lynda looked more uncertain. "Maybe."

"Lynda, it sounds like the next couple of days will be more than interesting. Let's meet tomorrow after breakfast, then head into town." I looked to my bodyguard. "Yser, please track down Andarion. With all the extra guards coming into town, I feel like he could use some work on his blade skills. We don't want either of you feeling rusty."

"Certainly," Yser glanced back on her way out the door.

"Lynda, I would love to meet your brother when he arrives this afternoon."

She got the hint. "Sure, Ara. See you later."

"Raven, would you please sit with me for a while?" I said. "There is so much that we need to discuss."

Chapter 19

The Best Part

Outside my window, a late afternoon sun warmed the courtyard while a blurring staccato rhythm of dark metal striking against dark metal lulled me into a light sleep. Raven had stayed by my side throughout the afternoon. With her exile rescinded and my sentinel enlistment ceremony at hand, we had talked about each other's plans for the future.

I had been sure that Raven would be leaving soon with Andy. She had a place in the House of Ylamil, and her family wanted her there. What I hadn't recognized fully was the unforgivable pain that the abrupt exile had caused her. The line of Ylamil had been incredibly desperate to sever her from the family, and only time could heal the scars that were left on her spirit.

In my heart, I knew that I wanted to continue our betrothal. A connection like that held so much value for both of us, as scarred and disjointed as we were. Sure, we had only known each other for mere days, but I had shown Rae my ugliest side, and she had reached out for me just as I had tried to aid her in her darkest time. I vowed that I would always try to protect her and knew that she would do the same for me.

I was the last of my line. I intended to start a new House and wanted her to be a big part of it. "The best part" was her response. Her beauty and her surety took my breath away. I told her so. That earned me a kiss, which removed all doubt from my mind about my recent decisions.

Finally, we touched on a sensitive subject. Raven was very familiar

with Yseria Warric and knew that she could be serious trouble. Yser wasn't family to anyone, a rogue, and that was grounds for conflict in the eyes of the dark elves. Yseria was permanently severed from her line by the death of her parents. She was doing her best to survive. I respected her effort and connected with her on a level that many others had ignored. She deserved my protection, and she would have it.

Raven confirmed the tale of Jordarion's death and how it had driven a wedge between Andarion, the master, and Yseria, the student. Yseria had been betrothed to Andy's brother Jordarion. With Jordy's death from the bite of a spider-demon, she lost not only her love but her chance for a lasting connection to another dark elf line.

The fact that she had been Andarion's understudy with the sword might have been some help. There was a shared respect between them. But training together reminded both Andy and Yser of their terrible loss. They hadn't spoken honestly to each other in over a year. The steady rhythm of strikes and counterstrikes in the courtyard below led me to hope that maybe they had gotten to the point of reconnecting.

Doctor Loeb checked on me. He let us know that a sizable formal dinner was planned for the evening two days hence to cap off the summer promotion celebration with all dignitaries being present. A full day of rest and decent food had done wonders for my physical well-being. I could almost stand up straight again, and my calf had finally stopped leaking blood.

Lynda arrived shortly before dusk to invite Rae and me to an informal dinner in their keep's dining room. We would meet her and her brother there as soon as we got dressed and collected Andy and Yseria.

Meryl Snow was vastly different from his father, and his role as a liaison in the Duke of Stonnberg's court seemed a great fit. He was tall and thin with intense green eyes, reddish-blond hair, and a warm smile. As opposed to many of us in the dining room, he was entirely unarmed, that is, if his charm wasn't a weapon.

"My sister has told me much about you, Raven, but she hasn't mentioned that you had a sister and a striking one at that." Meryl

turned his smile towards Yseria. He was wedged between the two dark elves, sitting across the table from us.

I reached for Raven's hand under the table and squeezed it gently in a plea for support.

"While she isn't actually my sister, Meryl, we are closely connected through family and friends," Rae spoke with a nod toward Yser, who was still at a complete loss to Meryl's compliment. "In fact, it was my father, King Ylamil, that recommended her service as a bodyguard for my betrothed."

Smooth. I hadn't forgotten that Raven grew up in the court of her father and would know how to speak their language. She had just answered Meryl's unspoken question of where Yseria fit in the scheme of things by declaring support for Yser from three different persons of influence. It was as gentle a hands-off as I've ever seen. It brought an even stronger grin to Meryl's face.

Before this conversation could progress further, I changed the subject, "Meryl, where is the duke this evening?"

"He's meeting with my father now. It seems there are some serious threats and rumors of threats rolling around the Vigil these days. Duke Ragir is concerned, to say the least, and there is talk of the King becoming involved."

"Will the King be coming here?" I asked.

"No, but his representative is due to arrive tomorrow with Vigil Thorn. There's even word of a third Vigil coming to Berykholt for the promotion ceremony. Things are heating up."

"Is that why there are so many new guards walking around the courtyard?" said Lynda. "Wouldn't Captain Glenn's House Guards be sufficient for the stronghold's security?"

"Some in the land of Colivar don't value the Vigil's work and look to promote their own interests. Some might even act in more aggressive ways. But don't worry, my dear sister, while I can see that Ara has his dedicated bodyguards, I will protect you," and here he thumped his chest with his thin-fingered fist.

I almost winced at the gesture.

Lynda rolled her beautiful green eyes. "There he goes, taunting the most dangerous person in the room."

"I'm glad that someone is watching over Lynda, and I would count that person a friend," I said, looking back at Meryl. "Even with all our bodyguards, the care that Lynda has shown Raven and me is very much appreciated."

I reached my arm around Lynda's shoulders and gave her a gentle hug. "Lynda, I'm sorry that I haven't been a very good friend to you. I know that I haven't been as open and honest as I should be, but you are very much under my protection, and I hope we find more time to spend together before duty drags us away."

I didn't have the smooth tongue of a diplomat, but I meant what I said.

"I take it that the same sentiment doesn't extend to my father as well," said Meryl, ever perceptive.

"Let's just say that we have a working relationship," I replied. "When it comes to fighting the Horde, your father knows his business and his weapons well."

"I see."

I sincerely hoped that Meryl didn't.

Andarion took that moment to stand up and clear his throat. Heading our way was the Duke of Stonnberg himself, with a mean-looking pair of bodyguards at his back.

The bodyguards wore armor similar to ours, with leather over chainmail, but their use of swords instead of axes told me that they weren't from the Order. More likely, they came from the ducal army. They halted a dozen feet from us while the duke approached our table.

"Dear Lynda, you grow more lovely every time we meet," said Duke Ragir. "I've just come from a meeting with your father, and he suggested that I meet your acquaintances."

And here, Meryl smoothly stepped in to make introductions, completely ignoring the dark elves by his side.

"Duke Ragir, here we have Raven Ylamil, daughter to the King of Bastian in Everest and her consort, Ara."

At the word consort, Lynda gently put her hand on my arm, just in case.

"Well met, young lady. I have not had the pleasure to meet a member of your family, but my grandfather often spoke highly of the

time he met the King of Bastian.”

My betrothed replied as a lady of the court, “The pleasure is mine, Duke Ragir. I look forward to speaking with you at the promotion celebration dinner this week.”

At that moment, the doors to the dining room burst open, showing us a large group of new faces.

The duke quickly nodded to Raven and excused himself, heading over to intercept the new arrivals and pulling Meryl with him. We were well placed to catch all the events of the evening.

“Consort?” I muttered under my breath.

Rae whispered into my ear, “You would make a wonderful consort.”

Okay, I did sort of like the sound of that.

Lynda quickly added, “Ara, whenever dealing with dignitaries such as the duke, the best strategy is to always remain as inconspicuous as possible.”

Across the room, a woman had entered, fresh from the road and wearing most of it. The duke had stepped into her path.

“Where is he?” she snarled loudly into the duke’s face, trying to get by him into the room.

The duke held his ground, pointing back out the door and up the stairs. His bodyguards had begun to advance when three even larger men pushed their way into the room behind the woman. The heads of heavy axes peered over their shoulders.

“It appears that Vigil Thorn has arrived early,” I said.

“I guess she wanted to beat the storm that’s rolling in from the west,” said Andarion.

Where Vigil Snow would bring an air of authority and calm to any room, Thorn brought energy and command. It felt like a spark to a dry match.

“Do you think that she’s come here to recruit?” Raven couldn’t hide a look of concern.

“It would seem so,” I said. “And Thorn’s group will be staying in our keep along with the duke.”

Meryl had somehow placed himself in the middle of the fray and managed to get Vigil Thorn turned around and headed out the door. For a man that likely couldn’t lift a heavy axe, he wasn’t at all

intimidated by the group of hardened sentinels.

"If Thorn has arrived, that means that the King's representative is also here," said Lynda. "It might be a good time for us to slip out. I wouldn't mind relaxing in your living room, away from the action, that is, unless Raven has other plans for her consort."

"Lynda, have I told you that I love you?" Andarion's eyes almost burst with laughter.

Who said dark elves don't have a sense of humor?

We all returned to our floor in the adjacent keep and camped out around the living room. My body was still healing, and I needed to take it easy.

"How was your workout today, Andy?"

"Surprisingly refreshing."

###

It didn't seem to surprise anyone when Captain Glenn arrived an hour later with an escort and a summons for me to attend Vigil Snow. I asked Yseria to go with me. Bodyguards seemed to be accepted throughout the castle tonight, and I didn't feel like facing a pair of Vigils alone.

Arriving with Glenn and Yseria at the door to Vigil Snow's meeting room, we were held up by the gaze of several familiar bodyguards standing outside. Meryl was waiting there as well. From inside the room, we could hear the loud voice of Vigil Thorn railing away about barbarians of all things.

"The girl will have to wait out here with us," said one of the ducal guards.

"No, she won't." I took hold of Yseria's hand and nodded to Captain Glenn to proceed.

He surprised me by unlocking the door. Once Yseria and I had entered, he locked it again from the outside. The room became silent, and we were faced with the two Vigils, Duke Ragir of Stonnberg, and a fourth, a man dressed expensively in black.

I could hear the storm now, arriving with a crash of lightning. Driving rain pounded against the window, masking our words from the many interested ears outside the locked door.

In a low-key voice, Vigil Snow made introductions, "Ara, I would like

you to meet Vigil Akila Thorn and Duke Ragir, as well as Lord Roger Small, the Honorable Judge of Maidenhall and first cousin to the King of Colivar. Vigil Thorn and I were just discussing you and your future and thought it prudent that you be here.” And here, he offered Vigil Thorn a look of remorse.

If Duke Ragir was at all surprised to see the consort of a dark elf princess standing before him, he hid it well. Vigil Thorn looked slightly less dusty than when I saw her earlier, and I realized that a good deal of her darker complexion wasn’t actually dust from the road. She was a half-elf, and I thought that they were supposed to be rare. What came next shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did.

Vigil Thorn spoke in a much more calm and quiet voice, “Ara, I am so glad to finally meet you. Now, please remove your shirt.”

I looked to Vigil Snow, and he nodded, “Please, Ara, the door is locked.”

I looked back at Yseria and her look of confusion. “Just remember what I said about getting to know each other better.”

I stripped off my leather armband, leather shirt, and undershirt. Taken as a whole, I was a mess. My left side still radiated a broad spectrum of hues. My left arm looked like a rabid dog had been gnawing on it like a bone. My back boasted several parallel foot-long scars from upper left to lower right. First and last of all, I wore the angry red branding scars of the Vigil on my right breast and shoulder blade.

“There’s more that I could show you, but there are ladies present,” I offered the room my sardonic best.

“Snow, you are barbaric,” whispered Thorn, seething with disgust. “You gave him the marks but not the name.”

Snow looked placid. Duke Ragir looked pale. Lord Small looked intrigued, but I wasn’t sure. He was surprisingly difficult to read.

I couldn’t see Yseria, but I could sense the shock and the pity that she felt, along with her revulsion and fear. It rolled off of her in waves. She was my bodyguard without a scratch on the outside. Her pristine condition had only made things harder for her on the inside.

“Yser, I very much need you to be here. Just take a deep breath,” I told her quietly.

“Okay,” she said, moving away from the door.

Vigil Thorn stepped forward and gently placed her hand on my left arm, covering my puncture scars.

“What does the amulet signify?” she asked.

“That I’m the consort of Raven Ylamil. She is a daughter of the King of Bastian.”

“It smells of shamanic magic.”

“Yes, it does,” I agreed.

“May I see your knife?” she asked.

“Its name is *Fei-Krull*. It was a *Kjaira* of some renown in Hell.” I handed her the weapon.

“And how do you know this?” She sniffed the fang.

“Shamanic magic of Bastian. The dark elves use it to defend their city. They recently tracked down a demonic portal in the mountains close to their city, and I led a team of elves into a demon-infested cave to destroy it. Did you know that man-made altars could act as portals through the Veil?”

Thorn answered as thunder shook our window, “Why do you think I’m so busy in the jungles to the East? The place is swarming with insane heretics and devil worshipers.”

She handed back my knife and let go of my arm. Turning to Vigil Snow, she said, “Storm, now.”

Snow acquiesced. “Storm,” he replied. Looking to the duke and the judge, he said, “Gentlemen, you are each a witness to the ascension of Vigil Ara Storm.”

Duke Ragir and Judge Small each bowed in my direction.

“Forgive me, Ara. It was necessary,” said Snow, bowing to me as well.

Vigil Thorn motioned Yseria forward, scooping up and handing her my clothes. “Please help Vigil Storm get dressed.”

Outside, the rain continued to pound in a determined manner yet failed to drown out the beating of my heart.

Chapter 20

Changing Shifts

Lightning flashed outside, casting hard shadows on my sudden ascension. Vigil Snow unlocked and opened the door, inviting Captain Glenn inside while Duke Ragir and Judge Small hurried away with their guard escorts. Glenn gave me a bow and clapped me on the back before rushing out. Vigil Thorn's bodyguards had come into the room. Thorn introduced me to Sentinels Volk, Peeler, and Timms, who all bowed carefully and shook my hand.

Introductions continued as I presented the diminutive Yseria all around. The size difference was almost comical when compared to Thorn's men, but Yseria was now the sole bodyguard of a Vigil. The three massive sentinels each gave her a respectful nod. I surprised Yser with a hug and thanked her for being there.

Thorn gave me an emotional bow and a hug. She was a formidable woman and surprisingly hard to read in-depth for one that wore her mood so openly. There was a brazen hardness about her, a wall of protection around her heart that struck a familiar chord. I was immediately glad to have met her.

Vigil Snow had one warning for us before we left. "There are now three Vigils present in Berykholt, and the ascension of a Vigil always draws unwanted attention, no matter how secret we have tried to keep it. It is when a Vigil is most vulnerable. We must take precautions to maintain our safety and the safety of those around us."

It was still cats and dogs outside, but I wanted to get back to the others and share the news. I said good night and walked out with Yseria. We ran across the courtyard in the pouring rain and up a flight

of stairs to our rooms.

It was late, and the shared living room was empty. I peeked into Raven's bedroom and found her asleep. Much to my relief Andy was on duty, sitting by her bed.

I waved him out to talk, "Is she okay?"

"She still has trouble falling asleep on her own. Physically she has recovered, but her ordeal weighs heavily on her, and she is still very much reduced by it."

"Well, something has happened, and we're going to have to increase our security immediately."

We heard a knock on the door from the stairwell. Not feeling anything amiss, I opened the door to Scouts Duncan and Jacka on the second-floor landing.

Jacka explained their presence, "Just letting you know that Captain Glenn has reassigned the scouts to guard this keep while there are dignitaries present. We'll be covering the keep entrance and this landing throughout the night."

I quickly introduced Yseria and asked that the scouts coordinate with her and Andy. The dark elves would be splitting shifts in our living room tonight.

"Very good. Sleep well, Vigil." Duncan offered me a huge grin.

Andarion didn't miss a beat. "Mott, I think our boy is going up in the world. I'll take the first watch here. If there is any mayhem bound our way, I'd expect it sooner than later. The heavy weather would make great cover."

"Mott, if you would, Vigil Snow has asked that I take all precautions, and I could use a couple more hands to hold down the fort here until things settle down." I handed Mott a piece of paper. "Please ask Captain Glenn to round those two up and send them our way first thing in the morning."

I checked all of the rooms and windows on our floor before sitting down with Andy. Yseria had already turned in, and I badly needed to rest. I wasn't anxious about anyone getting by Master Andarion or the elite scouts. I just needed to talk.

I started in a quiet voice, "Yseria saw my scars tonight in front of the Vigils, the duke, and the King's cousin."

“How did she react?”

“I felt her shock, but it quickly changed to a confused mixture of sympathy, disgust, and fear. I don’t want to drive her away.”

“It’s understandable. I think that Yser’s isolation in Bastian, as well as her great skill with a blackblade, has left her vulnerable to the deeper scars of life.”

“I believe that she’s always going to question whether she could do more than just survive. She pushes herself too far sometimes. I bet that is what the King saw, too, when he assigned her to guard me.”

“Ara, you might be right. I had to stop training Yseria. Not because I was reminded of Jordy, but because I knew that one day, she would have the skill to kill me. Then where would she be?”

“Not here, that’s for sure, and I think she’ll do well here, given the time to heal.”

“And where is here?” he asked. “Now that you have officially ascended, I don’t see you remaining long in Berykholt with Vigil Snow.”

“Wherever the Infernal Horde raises its ugly head.”

“Well, she’ll be safer there with you than in Bastian.”

“Andy, wake me when you change shifts with Yser.” I staggered off to bed.

###

A gentle knock at the door brought me awake. Dawn’s quiet light seeped through my window. I rose to feel much better rested yet cursing Andy for letting me sleep the full night. My calf itched with the rapid healing of the gash given by a spider-demon’s hook. My brain itched, wondering who would be knocking on my door at this hour. Our bodyguards would typically walk right in.

I opened the door to see Yseria fronting a room full of rather large bodies.

“Ara, Vigil Thorn is here, and I thought you might not want to keep her waiting,” Yser spoke, giving me a small bow.

“Friends, especially one that is also my bodyguard, never bow to me,” I told her quietly. “But thank you for waking me.”

I stepped into the common room, still wearing my clothes from the prior evening.

"Vigil Storm, had enough beauty sleep?" said Thorn. "I've just stopped by with a little offer for you. Seeing that you are a bit short on sentinel bodyguards now, and I'm a bit short on fresh recruits, I've decided to lend you Sergeant Volk. Of course, you will have to earn his services first by meeting me this afternoon for a bit of recruiting. I hear that you are one of the precious few to have built a rapport with Sergeant Masterson. How about it?"

Volk was imposing. He stood about six-three and was a good sixty pounds heavier than me. Armed and armored, I'd put him in the Hell-knight class. As a veteran sentinel-sergeant, he would be invaluable for a newly minted Vigil.

"I'm in the mood to do some recruiting myself. Courtyard, mid-afternoon?" I said, getting a nod from both the sergeant and Vigil Thorn.

"Time for breakfast." Thorn herded her men out of our suite.

"What's all the noise?" Raven peered out the door of her room.

"I was just lining up a new tutor for Yseria. Someone more her size," I chuckled.

I sensed Rae's anxiety at the mention of Yseria.

"Oh, and why is that?" she said.

Heading into Raven's room and closing the door, I answered, "Yseria got a promotion last night. She's now the bodyguard for Vigil Ara Storm."

Raven stepped back and gave me a bow. She spoke with a mist in her eyes, "You have your House but don't think for a minute that you're no longer my consort and betrothed."

"Not even for a second," I responded, grabbing her in a reassuring hug that quickly escalated into something more intimate. Her lips covered my mouth, and her breath filled me with a warmth that I'd never experienced. The stinging pain of our shared emptiness slowly eased, and her anxiety disappeared.

Andy knocked. "Don't overexert yourself, Ara. Our breakfast will be getting cold."

"Let's get ready and head to breakfast," I sighed. "It's going to be an interesting day."

Soon enough, we were going down to the dining room in Snow's

keep, trailing Andarion. I had sent Yseria ahead to rouse Lynda.

Sentinel-Scout Pika Havens was just inside the entry door to our keep and looking ready to complete his shift. Drawing *Fei-Krull*, I tapped the blade of Pika's hunting knife. "Good hunting, Pika."

"Good hunting, Storm," he replied.

"Pika, do you remember Raven? Raven, Sentinel-scout Pika Havens was present the night we found you. He even killed one of the demons trailing you."

"May I call you Pika?" Rae responded, getting an eager nod from the scout. "Thank you, Pika. I have a new life because of your courage and dedication."

"Any time." Pika appeared rejuvenated by the kind attention.

Entering the dining hall, we found Yseria and Lynda waiting for us. Lynda hopped up from her seat to capture me in a big hug.

"Vigil Ara Storm," she said, looking me over. "My father gave me the news. But why are you dressed for war? Aren't we going into town after breakfast for some new clothes?"

"Well, I have been informed that my new position doesn't preclude my prior roles, such as consort to a princess. Another of my roles is acting as a bodyguard to the graceful and elegant daughter of Vigil Snow, so I figured I ought to dress the part."

Lynda blushed, then said, "Who are you fooling? You just like to wear the kit because it makes you look tough."

"You think I look tough?" I said with an overdone eagerness.

Ouch!

Yser poked me in my tender side. "Looking tough and being tough are two very different things, so come on, let's eat."

As we finished breakfast, a pair of sentinels lugging heavy packs approached our table.

"Lynda, what a coincidence, meeting you here!" said the shorter and more vocal of the pair.

"I live here, Keil. What brings the Martell brothers to our keep?" Lynda wasn't altogether thrilled.

"We've been assigned to the new vigil—Vigil Storm," said Keil. "Have you seen him around?"

"Certainly. Ara is my bodyguard, after all." She provided only a

smirk for a clue, leaving Keil at a complete loss.

At this point, I stood and held out my hand. "Vigil Ara Storm," I said, receiving one completely dumbfounded handshake and one more confident one.

"There are plenty of introductions to go around," I said to the group. "This is Keil Martell and his younger brother Sevin, sentinel-adepts from the recent spring class. They come highly recommended. As Lynda already stated, I do consider myself her personal bodyguard, but that pretty much goes for everyone here in my company. This is Raven Ylamil, youngest daughter to the King of Bastian. She is my betrothed."

I paused to let that sink in for Keil before continuing. He nodded his approval.

"The white-haired beauty standing next to you is Yseria, my personal bodyguard, and next to her is Andarion, Raven's cousin and bodyguard. All three of them carry elven blackblades and have used them to kill demons. Please respect their skills and loyalty."

Thankfully, both brothers nodded in agreement at that request. It was the foundation for my new House.

"As you can see, we are a small company, and I'm happy to have you with us. Any questions?" I finished.

Sevin replied, "What are our duties?" He carried a heavy axe across his back, while Keil preferred the quicker, lighter version.

"We will have additional sentinels joining us later today, but in the meantime, personal security is the priority, so let's get you sorted out in our rooms and kitted up. The ladies want to go into town."

###

The morning passed with relative ease. After assigning rooms to Keil and Sevin and sitting through another examination by Doctor Loeb, we walked into town. Visiting two different tailors and a leatherworks shop, we sorted new clothes and leathers for Yser and Andy as well as something a bit finer for me to wear during tomorrow night's dinner event. *Exile* rated a brand-new scabbard that ran across my back, putting the weapon's handle just above my right shoulder for easy access. *Fei-Krull*, my fang-dagger, still fit snugly across my lower back.

Raven suggested that I have an insignia made for my new House. She borrowed my half-moon pin to use as an example and disappeared into a metalworks shop with Lynda. Keil went inside while Andy, Yser, Sevin, and I waited out front, enjoying the fresh morning air and getting to know the newest member of Company Storm.

Where Keil was talkative and brash, Sevin talked with his eyes and the direction they chose. He was a bit taller than me, with a strong resemblance to his older brother, but considerably more perceptive and shy.

I could feel his discomfort, his lack of experience with the fairer sex matching mine. He had a hard time looking at Yseria until she playfully asked him to show her his weapon. He complied, carefully handing her his heavy axe and accepting her elven blackblade in return. He was impressed.

The rainstorm had passed overnight, and we watched a steady flow of visitors emerge in Berykholt. Several recruits were out walking with family or girlfriends, and the inn across the way was running a hectic business.

At least one person of significance was leaving town. A dozen blue-clad horse troopers trotted down the busy street, heading away from the castle. Their perfectly groomed horses, shining breastplates, and heavy swords separated them from the usual sentinel horsemen. In their midst rode the finely dressed Lord Roger Small, Judge of Maidenhall, with his small retinue.

The King's cousin signaled a halt as the group was about to pass us and turned his horse our way. Contrary to his name, he wasn't a small man in physical stature or presence. He was about my height, and his black hair and dark brown eyes added to his solemn demeanor.

He spoke to us from his horse, "Vigil Storm, I would like to congratulate you on your official ascension."

I fought the urge to bow. "Thank you, your Lordship. Heading home so soon?"

He held an air of certainty and concern. "Duty calls. I believe we are in a similar line of work. Maidenhall is mine to protect."

"I have not had the honor of seeing its walls."

Small leaned forward. "Vigil Storm, if you don't mind, would you

please show me your dagger?"

I pulled out *Fei-Krull* and handed it up without hesitation. "What do you think? Ever seen the like?"

And here, he surprised me. He sniffed it. His eyes narrowed, and I felt a small tremor of fear and sadness run through him. He returned it to me, stone-faced.

"It would be an honor if you would find your way south to Maidenhall in the coming months. I can be found at Sturgess Courthouse, and I believe we could be of great service to each other."

With that, he turned and resumed his long ride home.

###

The afternoon found me escorting Vigil Thorn into the sentinel-recruit barracks for a meeting with Sergeant Caleb Masterson. The summer class promotion was upon us, and he had nowhere to hide.

"Sergeant, I'd like to introduce you to Vigil Akila Thorn. We're both interested in hearing your recommendations for recruiting from the summer class."

"Well, we do have a few alpha ducks about to be hatched," he replied. "As far as I know, a couple of them are already spoken for by a certain young Vigil, but this is a strong class with plenty of good eggs to choose."

And here he sent out Sergeant Tomkins with a list of a dozen recruits to round up. As expected, I officially landed Gunner Trew and Brandon Hicks before Akila signed up another ten, including the stout Jayl Griffen.

Vigil Thorn was actively defending the heavily wooded East region of Colivar from recurring demonic hordes and was in dire need of worthy replacements. She relied on Vigil Snow and Vigil Stone in the West to organize and train more sentinel recruits. Stone was known to produce exceptional riders and cavalry troopers better suited to the terrain in the west, center, and south of Colivar.

As promised, Sergeant Gregor Volk returned with us as the newest member of House Storm. He took charge of my four young sentinels, and each would have a private room in our keep. For the time being, all five sentinels would be working as part of my security detail, though their training would still be focused on the Order's techniques and

tactics for fighting demons.

I planned to include my dark elf bodyguards and Raven in my advanced sentinel training, further augmenting that with my own experience and expertise. Their skill and the hardness of their blackblades would complement the shields and axes of the sentinels well.

###

For the first time in my life, I enjoyed the beauty of the moment and the camaraderie of my peers. I was seated in the place of honor, between Duke Ragir and Vigil Snow, with Raven and Lynda directly across the table. As the formal dinner ended, Vigil Snow officially announced my ascension as Vigil Ara Storm and presented me with a token of office. The gold coin had the symbol of the Order of the Vigil on one side and a lightning bolt crossing a half-moon on the other. It would allow me, if ever challenged, to show my Vigil bona fides without having to remove my shirt.

On our way back from the recruits' barracks, Vigil Thorn had told me that the Vigil marks were much more than just scars and that I had been a Vigil in everything but name from the moment the branding took place in Lockrun.

Vigil Snow had had his reasons for hiding the fact from all, but a trusted few, and his explanation, 'It was necessary,' still echoed in my mind. That simple statement taught me more about being a Vigil than anything else I'd learned over the past couple of months.

Raven and Lynda wished me a happy eighteenth birthday and gave me a small wooden box. It contained a few dozen silver badges, lightning over a black half-moon, to identify members of my new House. I pinned a badge onto each of their dresses in honor of the place they held in my life.

As the evening wound down, my thoughts ran back to my friend Cat in Lockrun. We would always celebrate our birthdays together. She would be turning twelve this week, and I hadn't had a chance to get her a real birthday gift.

Suddenly, my vision went dark, and I had an oppressive feeling of dread and immense terror. The feeling shocked me so much that I had to sit down and concentrate on keeping my dinner in place. I gasped

as the scars on my chest and shoulder flared to life in a searing pain.

Raven put her hand on my shoulder. "Ara, are you alright?"

I shook my head, unable to speak, unable to see anything but the face of Cat, her eyes closed. Reaching out, I grabbed Rae's hand and began to count in my head. Finally, my vision cleared, and I regained a hold on myself.

Looking to Vigil Snow, I coughed, "It's Lockrun. Something's terribly wrong."

Chapter 21

Return Trip to Hell

Emotions ran wild in the meeting room, mostly mine. Glenn and Loeb were there, along with Duke Ragir and the other two Vigils. Raven clung to my side as I struggled to control my temper. Thorn fought the urge to take charge. Snow, for once, was at a loss, and I could sense the deep-seated fear he tried to hide.

“What are the chances of another outbreak so soon after the last?” I pressed.

“We don’t even know if there is an outbreak. We’ll have to send scouts to investigate further before mobilizing,” said Snow. “How certain are you of this?”

“Certain enough to go myself. I’ll ride with your scouts,” I said.

“Perhaps it isn’t a large outbreak. You would have both noticed that,” said Loeb. “And it wouldn’t take that many demons to threaten Lockrun and its small militia.”

“The area was fully cleansed when we left a month ago,” added Glenn. “Could it be stragglers emerging from caves?”

“Lockrun has walls made of timber. There aren’t that many mines in the area,” I said. “Maybe it’s Bastian all over again.”

“That would be a worst-case scenario with too many perils to name,” said Snow. “Ara, please take your whole team and a couple of Corbin’s scouts. They’ll be able to get you there in less than a week with everyone riding hard.”

###

We left Berykholt at dawn, leaving nothing of ours behind, well, except for one thing. I had handed Lynda a small, leather-wrapped

bundle containing a pair of golden amulets and asked her to keep them safely hidden in her keep. They were too valuable to risk falling into the wrong hands.

Each member of my small team of five sentinels and three dark elves carried the small Storm Company badge on their left breast. I carried a different storm locked inside me, fighting to save it for the demonic plague that I was sure had invaded Lockrun.

Corbin had offered us Mott Duncan to act as the lead scout and guide for our trip to Lockrun. Mott also brought Sentinel-scout Ernest Tappen, one of his day patrol troopers. I had ridden with Tappen before and was glad to have the familiar face.

Our path would be fastest following the road south toward Stonnberg, then cutting east onto the road to Lockrun. The rough terrain of the Southern Everest range left us little in the way of good shortcuts.

We pushed our horses hard and had reached the outskirts of Stonnberg by the end of the second day. We took to training among ourselves each evening while we rested the horses. It helped ease our saddle-sore muscles and calmed the anxiety and anger that I felt. I was sure I could kill any demon we found in Lockrun, but I wouldn't know the situation or how many we faced until we got closer.

With such a small team, our battle plan for fighting a greater number of demons was sorted quickly. We defined three separate groups. Volk would anchor the line group with Hicks and Gunner to one side and the Martell brothers on the other. Sevin was better than advertised, and I could see how Hicks and Gunner both looked up to him for his skill. When placed between Volk and Sevin, Keil could hold his own. Raven and I paired off as the right flank aggressor pair. Yser and Andy took the left flank as a defender and decoy pair.

Each small group would be responsible for its well-being and would operate as it saw fit, without the need for any orders once a fight began. As the aggressor group, Rae and I would target any alpha demons first. At the same time, our bodyguards would use their quickness on the left side of the line, drawing the enemy's attention away from us. Of course, this would only work on an enemy party of suitably small size, probably not more than a dozen lesser demons at

once.

Much to my relief, Raven showed masterful skill with her elven blackblade. Having Andarion the Blade as a godmother and Ylamil blood to protect had given her finely polished skills while growing up. She was able to go head-to-head with Andy or Yser during sparring sessions, and her half-blood stature gave her a small advantage in size and strength.

I was hoping the elves' ability to wield their weapons with two hands would offer them enough power and quickness to take down any demons they faced. We emphasized the need to go for kills with every possible attack as a wounded demon was usually just as dangerous as a healthy one.

I had run my fighting doctrine past Sergeant Volk. He confirmed that Vigil Thorn used a similar style in the jungles of the East when facing small hordes, though with considerably more men. Knowing that my small team was under my protection, I had to be extremely careful about when and how we engaged.

###

Four more days of hard riding brought us within a few miles of Lockrun as the sun was setting behind us. On two occasions during our ride eastward, we had met riders coming down the road from Lockrun with tragic tales of savagery and chaos. Just as I suspected, each told us of demons hunting in and around the city. Now, the far horizon pulsed with spots of evil, and there was an acrid scent of a fire burning in the distance.

We pressed on, hoping to reach Lockrun's walls before full dark. To my dismay, we arrived to find the western gate fully open and no guard on duty.

A massive fire burned off in the direction of the town square. A cloud of smoke and the gloom of damnation filled the city. I could sense at least four demons moving inside the town's walls, and the scent of human blood was everywhere.

We dismounted and tied up our horses at the inner gatehouse. Then we shut and barred the gate. I wasn't sure if the twenty-foot-tall wooden walls would do much good in keeping out any more demons, but it might slow some of them down.

We stuck together as we dove into the hazy city, heading toward the central square. The dark hunters seemed to be gathered in that area, feeding off of the strong scent of fear and desolation.

A large bonfire billowed up in the middle of the square, casting a harsh light upon bodies and parts of bodies strewn everywhere.

Dread blanketed everything.

Reaching the lord mayor's house on the edge of the square, we found the solid iron doors to his mansion locked tight. The nearby jailhouse was wholly dark, and something even darker crept across its roof on ten long, hairy legs. Pointing out the threat, I put Volk in charge of the sentinels and scouts and told him to secure this side of the square while the elves and I hunted the other Hellions.

The spider-demon crept toward the sentinels, the fiend trying to remain hidden in the smoke and the shadows of the rooftop. Finally, it leaped off in their direction, landing a good ten feet short of Volk's line. The dark elves raced in behind it as Volk's group advanced with shields raised to the threat. Axes and black blades took it apart as I drew *Exile*.

Right on cue, a second devil-spider emerged to the rear of Volk's line. It had been tucked in behind the bonfire waiting for its partner to engage.

Of all the lesser demons I've faced, the spiders are the deadliest. With cunning and a tendency to ambush, paired with speed, claws, teeth, and venom, they are incredibly lethal to anyone not ready for them.

This one was racing straight for the back of Sentinel Keil Martell when I sheared off four of its rightmost legs, greatly slowing its run in. The beast screeched in defiance, which was its last mistake. Volk turned first, then hesitated as Sevin stepped forward to plant his axe between the dozen or so eyes the fiend had pointed his brother's way.

The blare of the demon stopped, but I could feel the terror it shed jumping around the square. The town's survivors would have heard its complaint for blocks in every direction.

Searching outward for the other beasts, I found two. Across the square stood the church and rectory filled with the pulse of panicked citizens. The bevy of human prey was being circled by two more

hunters.

“Mott, see if you and Tappen can get someone to let you inside the mayor’s house. Find out who’s still in charge and let them know that the Vigil has arrived.” I motioned for the elves. “Raven, please come with me. We’ve got a pair of demon-wolves behind the church.”

I sent Andy and Yser to the left, around the church clockwise, while Raven and I went right. With *Exile* drawn, I raced Raven for the first corner of the building, tracking the scents of musk and rotting flesh. We turned the corner in time to catch a wolf-beast tearing its way through a formerly robust wooden door on the side of the rectory.

Muffled screams sounded from inside the building as my broadsword removed the beast’s head. I hopped back, pulling Rae with me as the demon toppled and sprayed black blood all across the outer wall. There was no need to terrorize the locals any further with my usually morbid appearance. A second beast lurked on the far side of the church. Andy and Yser would take care of it.

Reaching through the remains of the door, I lifted the inside latch. Rae followed me inside, and we locked the door the best we could. The church building and rectory were crowded with terrified women and children but empty of any more beasts. I heard a vicious snarl outside, one that suddenly went silent. Pausing, I was now sure that the town was clear, at least for the moment.

“Pastor Riley! Sister Kay!” I called out in the dark, looking for someone familiar in the chaos of too many tears and fast-beating hearts. “Everyone be calm. The Vigil is here! The monsters are dead.”

A figure stood up in the middle of the room and carefully moved our way.

It was Sister Kay.

She carried the scent of smoke and uncontrolled fear. Even in the near darkness, I could see that her face was wet, and her body trembled.

Rae and I stepped further into the gloom. I pointed Rae to a lamp on the wall.

Kay asked in a whisper of disbelief, “Did the Vigil arrive? How did they get here so fast?”

“Sister Kay,” I said. “Are you alright?”

"No, none of us are whole anymore," she sobbed. "Are you with the Vigil? How do you know my name?"

"I heard a call for help. I'm Vigil Storm," I held out my hand to her. "You are under my protection, all of you."

Kay took my hand, her eyes searching intently in the semi-darkness.

"My friends call me Ara," I said as Raven finally managed to light the wall lamp.

Sister Kay allowed me to pull her close, and I held her quietly while the room resettled under the subdued light.

"I'm so sorry for not being here sooner. Where is Pastor Riley?" I asked. "We need to get that side door repaired."

"He is in the basement with the injured."

I knew that a busy person had less chance to dwell on the horror. "I'll go check on him. Please light some more lamps and start getting folks to the bathrooms. More than a few are gonna need to be cleaned up."

"Raven, this is Sister Kay. She helped raise me after my mother left. Rae, please call in Yser and Andy. Tell them the city is clear."

Pastor Riley was overwhelmed with the many injured, most of which were town militia. The wounds were severe, if not fatal. He plied ahead in the stifling and poorly lit basement. Yseria began helping with the wounded, and Andarion remained in place to guard the Church.

The city was safe for the time being, but the night remained, and the surrounding valley needed to be cleansed.

Raven accompanied me to the town's eastern gate. We got it closed and locked before returning to the square to meet with Volk and, hopefully, the lord mayor.

Volk held his line outside the mansion with shields at the ready. "Duncan is inside now with the mayor."

"Okay, the town is now clear, and both the east and west gates are locked. The nearest demon is holding its position a mile to the northeast. I plan to kill it tonight if it doesn't move or follow it home if it does."

Waving to Hicks, Gunner, and the Martells, I pointed to the carcasses. "Mind dragging the demons into the fire before anyone

sees them? Folks around here are completely undone, and a hairy twitching nightmare won't help. Also, watch out for the venom dripping off their fangs."

I walked over and rapped on the mayor's heavy steel door. Tappen opened it, directing Raven and me inside. The mansion smelled much the same as the church. It was packed tightly with hundreds of terrified people, and I kept a lookout for any familiar faces in the dim light. There was one in particular that I needed to see before anything else.

We headed to the mayor's meeting room, a place with a few not so fond memories. I sent Tappen to grab one of the sentinels outside and collect all our horses from the western gate. The Mayor had stables nearby where they could be fed and watered.

I found Mott. The scout was the center of attention in the crowded room. "What's the word, Sentinel-scout Duncan?"

"Vigil Storm, please meet Lord Mayor Ramsey."

"Vigil Ara Storm," I said, turning to meet his Lordship again.

Here was a man that had seen his city plunged into uncontrolled chaos and fear. From his royally sanctioned position, he was as helpless as the next person to do anything about it. The mansion was filled with the haunted, desperate eyes of men, women, and children on their last stop before insanity.

"Vigil Storm, well met. It's been a nightmare."

I'll give the Mayor credit. He didn't even blink as he recognized me. He smelled of prey, fearful and shocked due to the traumatic events raging through his city.

"Mayor, your town is currently clear of any demons. We killed four beasts, two behind the church and two right outside your front door," I spoke loudly, intending to bring Duncan and the rest of the room up to speed as well. "There are more demons outside the city walls to the northeast. We'll deal with them later tonight."

Mayor Ramsey nodded, still buried in his grief.

"Lord Ramsey, how is your daughter?" Cat should be here, but she wasn't. I was unable to think of anything else for the moment.

"I don't know," he stammered.

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"Well, she hasn't spoken since the first attack four nights ago."

“Only four nights ago?” I looked over at Mott. “Not six?”

Ramsey replied, “The first demon came over the walls four days ago, just after midnight. The city militia was able to kill it, but only after a dozen citizens were lost. More Hellions have shown up every night since.”

It was time to take charge. The Vigil held sway in any situation where the Infernal was at hand.

“Mott, you are now in charge of the town militia and are authorized any resources needed to begin Lockrun’s defense and recovery. There are two dead demons on the far side of the church. Please have them burned and send some folks to repair and reinforce the doors of the church.”

I looked back at Mayor Ramsey. He was in no condition to make any decisions, and without seeing Cat, neither was I.

“Mayor, please make sure that Scout Duncan has the help he needs. We’ll need you out and about at first light to help get the citizens back to living. But first, please show me where to find Cat.”

Ramsey led me into his rooms, with Raven following. “The doctor couldn’t find anything wrong with her. And she barely eats or drinks.”

Cat was asleep in his bed with one of the maidservants watching over her. I took hold of Cat’s hand. She barely stirred at my touch.

I had to ask, “Mayor, has she complained of any bad dreams lately? Did she lose anyone close to her in the attacks?”

He replied, “A few bad nightmares a fortnight ago, then this.”

“We’ve still got a busy night ahead of us. Will she be awake in the morning?”

“I’ll try and rouse her.”

Back outside, I let Volk know that Duncan would be in charge of the city’s recovery and defense until further notice. Volk was to make sure Mott was getting the support he needed and to check on the church while Raven and I were out hunting.

The city of Lockrun was currently buried under an avalanche of terror and dread, and we needed to do everything in our power to dig them out alive. As it was, dark energy bled from the city’s walls, creating a beacon of fear that would attract every hungry demon in the area.

We slipped out the east gate about four hours before dawn and took off, running northeast in search of our first target. Acting strange for a Hell-beast with dinner pulsing in the distance, the ant-demon hadn't moved one way or the other. As the closest threat to Lockrun, its life ended quickly with the assistance of *Exile*. The kill filled me with a fire that helped me pinpoint our next victim two miles farther out. There had to be a higher-order demon in the area with some control.

Another fire-eyed ant-demon awaited us. These were slower yet powerful beasts about the size of a steer. The demon could fight on either two or four of its six legs. It was quicker on four but could tower over its opponent and attack with four claws when only standing on two. As part of a horde, it posed a serious threat, being strong enough to push through or over a sentinel shield wall. As a single demon in the open, it was merely prey.

Wanting to get a clear idea of the effectiveness of Raven's blackblade, I held back and let her take it on solo.

As soon as it stood up on its back legs, Raven dove low and cleanly separated one of the supporting legs from its torso as she rolled past. The five-legged beast dropped down, and before it could turn to face her, she leveled a two-handed chop across its back half, crippling it entirely.

The ant-beast continued to drag itself around, but with its head lowered and front claws keeping its balance, it was utterly defenseless to Raven's final swing.

We had been moving steadily uphill all night. Three miles behind us, low in its valley, the bonfire in Lockrun acted as a beacon. We jogged onward to the northeast in search of our final objective, concerned that the demonic activity around us had suddenly ceased. Another two miles into the foothills, we found the site.

Three boulders had been rolled perfectly into place such that they aligned directly with Lockrun and its pinpoint of burning light. Tucked in at the base of the last rock was a vent from Hell. The red heat glowed brightly to my eyesight as we approached the opening, and I could smell the demon tracks all around it. There was a dark void at the bottom of this pit. We'd found the source of Lockrun's chaos and pain.

"What now?" Rae trembled. "We don't know what's in there."

“Lesser demons. At least one Hell-knight to control them, but probably more. They’ve stopped their flow towards Lockrun. They must be waiting for us. Want to go inside?” I already knew the answer and felt the dread in her reply.

“If we wait until morning, they’ll just have more demons down there waiting for us, won’t they?”

I dropped my travel pack. “Wait here for a count of thirty. I’ll go in first and draw their attention. Stay away from the Hell-knights if you can help it. They’ll probably remain passive unless you threaten the portal, and their heavy swords can cleave through anything. I prefer to save them for last.”

I slid into the hole and started to shuffle down through a small tunnel, a passage not more than four feet tall. It wasn’t a long trip to the cavern below, maybe a hundred feet at a fairly steep angle.

Relying on my talisman for a chance at surprise, I rolled forward into a large, hellish cave and drew *Exile* from the sling on my back. Blocking my path was a couple more bulky ant-demons. Behind them were a pair of fiendish wolf-men and a quartet of lovely lizards. And yes, tucked in an alcove at the back wall was an altar, an Infernal portal, surrounded by five Hell-knights.

Feth.

First things first, *Exile* slashed through the head of the giant ant-beast on my left, and I vaulted its twitching corpse, dashing for the nearest wolf-man. With their inhuman speed and razor-sharp claws, I viewed the hairy Hellions as the biggest threat on this side of the room.

The second wolf-demon leaped at me just as my sword parted the neck of the first. Momentarily committed, I could only appreciate the perfect timing of the beast as my strong left vambrace absorbed the rapid impacts of its jaws.

It shook its head and pulled, popping my left arm out of its shoulder socket.

My glaive sliced off its left arm off at the shoulder, but I quickly became more concerned about losing my own.

I had no choice but to relinquish *Exile*. Dropping the longer broadsword, I drew my fang-blade and leaned in closer to the wolf-beast before it could tear my arm off. *Fei-Krull* bit into its skull with two

fiery stabs, and suddenly I was free of its jaws. I stumbled backward and slammed into the near-molten wall at the rear of the cave.

Taking stock of the situation, I was pinned between two stout lizard-men and an eight-foot-tall fire-ant. Two more Hell-borne reptiles stood just a few steps back from the first pair, blocking my path to *Exile*.

Had I blacked out?

My left arm hung at my side, useless and numb. My right still gripped my fang-dagger, and my hair was smoking. Cured leather doesn't burn so easily, but hair does. *Who knew?*

Twenty-nine? Thirty?

Suddenly, the ant on my right was two feet shorter, its head tumbling to the ground at my feet.

THIRTY.

I ducked left as the lizard-kings adjusted to the new threat, swinging my fang into the neck of the leftmost creature.

It screamed, and fire burst from its mouth, further scalding the already blackened wall.

Fei-Krull punched another hole of orange light into the back of its skull, and I dodged forward, intent on collecting my glaive from the cavern floor. With only one arm in play, I yearned for its better reach.

Two raging reptiles blocked my way while Raven took on a third.

I stepped back, drawing the pair farther from Raven and my sword.

The shorter of the two lizards dropped to all fours and charged, aiming for my right leg, while the other came in high on my left.

Forced to my right, I vaulted the reptilian attack dog, punching a fiery hole in its spine on the way.

Its tail thrashed uncontrollably, tripping up its partner's pursuit. The second, more massive demon hurdled its way toward me.

I dodged forward, passing it in mid-air, and dove for *Exile*. The blade practically vibrated in my grip as I swept it up and swung it behind me, neatly severing a black-clawed hand from my pursuer.

Its jaws shot forward.

I spun and swung in from its left. *Exile* passed cleanly through its exposed neck. Two steps later, I beheaded the other lizard-beast as it tried to drag itself around to face me.

The last fiend standing was caught between Raven and me, but it

was on its last legs, literally. Raven had used her quickness to sever both of its arms, but the tough demon hadn't quit the fight. Looking to distract it further, I slashed its tail, ruining what little was left of its balance.

The lizard-man fell to *Talon's* killing blow—the line of lesser demons was finished.

Rae looked me over with concern, “Next time, you'd better make it a TEN count.”

“FIVE,” I replied, sheathing my glaive. “I'm gonna need a little help here.”

I was in bad shape, but at least my hair wasn't on fire, well, at least not any longer. The initial numbness in my arm was fading with my battle rage, and the pain was starting to make itself known.

Rae ducked her head under my dislocated shoulder and stretched my arm straight out from my side. With her back to me and my arm resting across her shoulder, she grabbed my elbow with both hands and pushed firmly outward. An audible *chunk* sounded from my shoulder as the joint popped back into place. The pain faded nicely to a dull ache.

I drew *Fei-Krull* and unbuckled its leather sheath. “Please tie me up,” I said, winning a smile from my betrothed.

“Anytime.” She fit the makeshift leather sling to my left arm, something to take the weight off my abused shoulder joint.

I was ready. Five demon-knights stoically awaited their return trip to Hell. I looked at Raven. “I can't do this without you.”

“You are so right about that.” She gave me one long soul-stealing kiss and pointed the way home.

Five minutes later, we clambered from the long smoky tunnel as the pit below slowly filled with molten lava. I held the lid of an old wooden box. The box had contained the blackened skeleton of what looked like a flying rat. Having stomped those bones into oblivion, I had dropped the rest of the box into a pool of lava. The altarpiece was an evil thing.

The predawn air cooled our lungs as we coughed our way clear of the Hell-hole. The Infernal pall began to lift as the dark altar melted below, and our souls felt better for it. We had five downhill miles to cover and the beacon of a bonfire calling us home. I figured we'd make

it there by dawn.

Chapter 22

Clear Sight

Lockrun had changed drastically during our round-trip to the Hell-hole. Scout Tappen was waiting for us at the eastern gate when we arrived. The sun was up, and we had been spotted while still a half-mile out of town. Mott Duncan had people watching atop the walls and the gates, keeping the citizens busy and safe. Tappen escorted us to the town square to meet with my cohort and Mayor Ramsey.

The bonfire in the square had been reduced to a pile of embers and ash by the time we returned. With the light of dawn, droves of vulnerable citizens had poured from the church and the mayor's mansion. People were cooking breakfast over the hot coals, and cots were being hauled into the square. Injured were being carried from fetid basements and houses for treatment under a clear summer sky.

Mott Duncan was awaiting our report. His day would be made or ruined by whatever I said.

I kept my face blank. "Mott, where's Andarion and Yseria?"

He replied, "Well, now that you've removed the threat, they're helping remove the injured from the church basement."

"How do you know that we removed the threat?"

"Well, first, look at you two. You went down a hole, didn't you? And you wouldn't have come out looking like Hell unless you had ended some kind of major trouble. How many Hell-knights were there?"

"Five," said Raven with a smirk. "But don't let him pretend that he killed them all by himself."

Duncan paused at that remark. That many Hell-knights was usually a sign of a major incursion.

“And second?” I asked Mott.

“Well, second, we all felt it, like a dark wave flowing back out to sea, a couple hours before dawn. The dread and the whimpering in Lockrun were just gone. Oh, and third, the young lady standing right behind you said so.”

I turned around to face my dearest friend. “Hello, Cat.”

It had only been a month since I last saw her, but it seemed so much longer. I recalled the promise that I made to her about not turning up again, looking half dead. I wasn’t sure my current state qualified.

The girl looked at me with her arms crossed, taking in my burned, crushed, blood-spattered, and overall mutilated appearance. She didn’t say a word.

“Happy Birthday,” I offered weakly.

And then she was in my arms, hugging me like there was no tomorrow. I could feel the relief and the love pouring off of her in waves more powerful than the Black pall that had blanketed Lockrun. It blotted out any pain I might have felt at that moment.

“Ara, did you forget our last talk?” she teased.

“I did not,” I showed her my best smile.

“Well then, where is it?”

“Ah, you mean this,” I said, reaching into my pack and pulling out a pin with a silver lightning bolt through a black half-moon. “This is my birthday gift for you.”

I pinned it to her shirt. “Cat, you are now an official member of Vigil Ara Storm’s company.”

The black leather strap of her earlier birthday gift still hung around her neck.

Cat looked from me to Raven, who wore the same pin on her breast. “And who is she?”

“That is Raven Ylamil, my second and betrothed. I saved her from some demons in the Everest Mountains, and now it turns out she’s even better at saving me.”

Cat laughed. “Are you sure? It doesn’t look like she’s doing such a great job. I mean, what happened to your arm and your hair?”

“Well, you should have seen what we did to those demons,” I

countered.

Cat's mood suddenly shifted back to one of fear. "I did," she said, with a solemn look in her eyes.

The girl was far too young to be experiencing what we faced. We all were.

"Cat, is that how you knew that Lockrun was safe? That they could start to bring the wounded out from the church basement?"

"Yes," she said, trying to put the dark thoughts behind her.

"And before all that, did it feel like a blanket of dread and despair had fallen on your head?"

She nodded, "How did you know?"

I touched my heart. "I felt it, right here, and I knew that I had to get to Lockrun right away. I'm so sorry that you suffered."

"Look who's talking, Ara." She took my hand. "Now, let's find a place for you and Raven to rest and let Sentinel Mott get back to work."

"Mott, please tell the team to start getting some rest and let them know the jailhouse is a good place to crash. I'll relieve you at noon."

After speaking with the lord mayor, Cat lent me her bedroom suite, giving Rae and me a chance to clean up and sleep. Raven took the first turn in the bathroom while I simply lay flat on the floor next to my pack. Sometime later, Andarion and Yseria arrived to pick me up and drag me into the bathroom. Washed and redressed, they dropped me onto the bed next to Rae, where we slept until noon.

Did I mention that I loved my bodyguards?

Back from the dead, I woke with the warmth of Raven wrapped around me. She was physically perfect, both in health and form, but she continued to carry a deep pain, a black fire in her soul that I sensed even as she slept. I shifted closer to her and gave her a light kiss. At that moment, I felt a brighter fire stir within her, and a feeling of peace took hold. I let my soul breathe it in for a while.

We arose to find Yser camped out on a small couch near the door. She got up to help me into my armor and fit a better sling on my left arm. She applied some salve to the back of my head, where the cave wall had burned away my hair, and checked my ribs.

I gave Yseria a hug as we left. "The bed is warm. Get some sleep."

Out in the square, Mott was overseeing the dispersal of the injured back to their own houses after treatment by the town doctors. Many didn't want to go after the days of isolation and terror.

"How goes the day, Mott?" I could see it hadn't gone well.

"Sadly, Vigil. As many as we send home, we've sent even more to the town's graveyard. The lord mayor has the list of deaths. Overall, the actual property damage was mild, and the city's walls are still intact."

"And our crew?"

"All asleep in the jailhouse, even Andarion."

"It's a good quiet spot," I said, speaking from experience. "Join them, and I'll wake you all later for dinner."

I found the lord mayor working in the square and suggested we speak in private. We went back to his study in the mansion.

"Mayor, we passed a couple of couriers from Lockrun on our way up here. Do you expect any help from the duke to arrive?"

"Yes, but nothing for at least another week. I've meant to ask you how you got here so fast. I'm guessing that the first courier sent would have arrived in Stonnberg today. My second messenger was headed to Berykholt."

"Your daughter is feeling much better now," I replied. "Did you notice the insignia on her shirt?"

"Of course, she said it was a birthday present from you. Have I reason to be concerned?"

"You remember when Vigil Snow claimed me, several weeks ago in this very house. Consider the pinning of your daughter to have the same meaning but without the humiliation and burning skin. It's not a decision that I make lightly, nor will I reverse, for Cat's sake. Cat is twelve but already showing signs of a gift called *clear sight*. She and I have always had a connection, and it was that connection that drove me to come here from Berykholt. I felt her dread and misery during my ascension dinner, two days before the first demon attacked Lockrun. That is why I have claimed her for the Order of the Vigil."

The mayor pleaded, "But she is only a young girl. She can't fight demons!"

"And, Lord Mayor, she won't. She is much too valuable to risk in

that manner. If I have learned anything during my short time with the Order of the Vigil, it's that they are very good at doing their job, and they're even better at keeping their secrets.

"To protect Cat, I'll need two things from you before my company departs. First, you've seen the marks placed upon me. I need you to find a person you trust to permanently tattoo a small Vigil insignia on her right breast and shoulder blade. Second, all of this must be kept secret. As smart and seemingly mature as she is, Cat is still a young girl, and I intend for her to remain here with you until she grows up."

I paused to let that sink in. "Do you agree, Lord Mayor?"

Ramsey honestly didn't have a choice but also saw a good deal when offered. He finally nodded, "Thank you for protecting Cat and protecting our city."

"To ensure the safety of all, we will be staying here until support from the duke arrives. I can assume that Vigil Snow will also be sending some of his own here, and we both know that he does what he must."

Mayor Ramsey prepared a full suite and additional rooms for my entire company in the visitor's wing of his sizable manor home. Raven and I shared the suite with our bodyguards, who slept on cots in the anteroom. I announced to my company and the lord mayor that Raven had saved my life and killed two Hell-knights during our fight to end the Hell-gate. She was my second and would be in charge if ever I became incapacitated. This fact seemed to have already been anticipated by the company, but I was glad to make it official.

Andarion and Yseria took our security seriously, shadowing Raven and me whenever we left the mansion. The news of the demon attacks in Lockrun and a Vigil's presence here had to be spreading far and wide by now.

I sat a late watch every night on a chair outside Cat's room. Just being there seemed to help her sleep, and it helped me focus. Cat had hidden away her Vigil Storm insignia but kept her *Kjaira* fang tethered around her neck at all times. The landscape around the valley of Lockrun was slowly coming back to life with natural predators and prey. Their growing nocturnal presence reassured me that the danger had passed.

As a small company, we continued to do all we could to help restore Lockrun. Volk had taken on the task of rebuilding the city militia with the help of Gunner, Hicks, and the Martells. Sevin was promoted to full sentinel for his axe-work on that second spider-demon, and I confirmed it.

Bailiff Hector Sims had lost his arm defending the city during the initial attack and bled to death that first night. Pastor Riley was appointed acting head of the town's militia until a permanent replacement for bailiff could be found. The pastor's solid faith and kind demeanor provided an example upon which folks could begin healing.

I was glad to see my old friend Corey present on the square as surviving heads were counted and rolls were taken. His father was busy at his forge, fulfilling an order from Lord Mayor Ramsey for several dozen axes in the mold of the Order. With the duke's support still apparently distant, the Mayor took it upon himself to better arm the locals against any potential threats.

The church was repaired, and its doors reinforced, as were the doors of many other large houses. Each would be a point of refuge for any future attacks. Funeral services were held every day, and Sister Kay began the arduous task of planning for the care of dozens of newfound orphans.

Scouts Duncan and Tappen made their presence felt by constantly patrolling in and around the walls of Lockrun and surveying the citizens for any desperate needs. Walls were manned day and night, and gates were opened each dawn. Beleaguered townspeople trickled slowly down the road to the west, but most stayed to rebuild.

Each afternoon I patrolled north and east with at least one of my company, scanning for any change in the fauna or any unnatural darkness on the horizon. The Hell-gate was closed, and nothing new appeared to threaten Lockrun by the time our first reinforcements finally arrived.

Epilogue

Barely a Wince

Four trying days after our arrival in Lockrun, Inquisitor Loeb rode in with Captain Glenn and a score of sentinel-adepts. To the untrained eye, the city of Lockrun almost seemed normal. To Loeb, the town was a tragedy yet to be overcome. I could feel the shock and mournfulness roll off him as he entered the city square.

"Doctor, Captain, well met," I said, with Raven and Mott Duncan at my side.

Duncan had proven himself a sharp mind and an able Third. His fond connection with Andarion helped build cohesion across the company with its vastly different members and backgrounds. He now wore the badge of Vigil Storm.

"Ara, you appear better than I expected, with barely a wince about you," said Loeb. "Who reset your shoulder socket?"

My arm was feeling much better, and I had already packed away my sling for the next injury. It hadn't fooled Doctor Loeb.

"Raven managed it. We were in a Hell-cave at the time, about to fight five Hell-knights."

Captain Glenn showed his disbelief, "Ara, you fought them with one arm?"

"I know. Wearing a sling wrecks your balance in a fast fight like that. We'll show you what's left of the cave site later today. It's only about five miles to the northeast. Instead of building up a horde, they sent a few demons at a time into the city each night. We secured the town and destroyed the Hell-gate, but there is a panic here among the people that hasn't gone away."

“One hundred and ninety-four citizens were killed throughout the four nights before we arrived, and dozens more were severely injured,” said Mott. “It was a feast of pure terror for the demons to consume. The resources necessary for the town’s restoration may be beyond us.”

“We expect a company in the duke’s colors to arrive the day after tomorrow,” said Glenn.

“Until then, there is much to do and much to discuss in private,” said Loeb.

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We closed the doors to the Mayor’s meeting room and posted Yseria outside.

Loeb got straight to the point, “What haven’t you told me, Ara?”

“I should be asking you the same,” I said, sensing that Loeb was deeply on edge. “What ails you so?”

“The Vigil is spread entirely too thin these days, and if it were possible, I’d say that Hell is heating up. The occurrence of a second Infernal outbreak in less than two months in the same spot is unprecedented. It would have been an even greater tragedy if not for your swift action.”

“Perhaps the Divine intervenes,” I suggested, wondering if it wasn’t just the opposite.

“We have asked our more esoteric resources for readings that could help explain the current state of the Infernal Cycle,” Loeb continued. “Vigil Snow believes that a full-scale demonic invasion of our realm is underway.”

“And what of these esoteric resources? Who are they, and what did they tell you?”

“Just as Bastian has its Shamanic Order, we have a cabal known as the Witches Divine with a presence in Maidenhall. Their most recent reading was of concern due to its unusual brevity, offering us but a single name.”

“And the name?”

“*Firefanged*,” he said.

“I heard the same word in Bastian. Do you know what it means?”

“No, but the Witches felt it was the name of a powerful entity

beholden to the Prince of Darkest Reality himself. Its presence seems to have masked the Infernal Cycle from their prying third eyes.”

After a brief pause, counting to eleven, I reached into my pack.

“Now, I have something to show you, something that indeed changes things here in the worst possible way.” I handed him the ornate wooden lid.

“After we dispatched the Hell-knights, I destroyed a ritual box that was holding the Hell-gate in place, but I kept this lid as evidence. Perhaps we can ask your divine witches about it and find out its source. Bastian’s Hell-gate also had a human-made object, a chalice of silver. The King and Chief Counselor of Bastian were of the strong opinion that the portal was created by a neighboring realm as an act of war. We must inform the King that such a portal has been found within the borders of Colivar.”

Loeb handed back the lid. “Ara, once the duke’s men arrive, you must ride south with this to Maidenhall.”

Inquisitor Loeb ended the tense meeting by handing me a sealed letter from Vigil Snow:

Vigil Ara Storm,

You are now an Entity in the land of Colivar. There is no higher law or power above you besides the true Divine. As Vigil, you are sealed to defend this land from all demonic threats. Your spirit and determination have been well documented for the King, all of his dukes, and your Vigil brethren. Doors will open at your command. As such, let no man or demon stand in the way of your calling.

The resources of the Vigil, King, and Colivar are at your disposal. As your organization grows, you will be expected to name a seat for your Vigil watch. Just as I have planted my flag in Berykholt, and Vigil Thorn has built her stronghold in Dungarr out east, the Crown will fund a permanent site for House Storm. Your choice is entirely up to you, though having a Vigil positioned central to the realm and within a reasonable distance of the King would be advantageous for us all. Please consider it.

I have seen you begin to grow your company already, and nothing is more critical than to have a well-founded and loyal

organization around you. Don't hesitate to pull in the people you need, but make sure that they are given a choice. I know that sounds at odds with the way that you were treated, but a Vigil is a different matter and critical to the survival of us all. Know that you and I wear the same scars on the outside. How we right the balance with those on the inside makes all the difference.

*With Respect,
Vigil Meryck Snow*

PS. My daughter Lynda sends her regards and gratitude for your friendship. She wanted me to mention that her twentieth birthday will be celebrated during the winter promotion event and that you are invited to attend.

THE END.

Coming Next:
The Scarred Man

About the Author

Rory Surtain stepped into the world of independent publishing in 2020 and hasn't been able to find his way out since. When he tires of writing, he edits, and when he tires of that, he publishes. Writing is an art and a long learned skill where each book is better than the last.

Surtain resides in Texas, enjoying the gulf coast clouds, the people, and the diversity of spirits and great cuisine.

Please follow him here on the Amazon Author page, Goodreads, or SURTAIN.NET for updates, questions, feedback.

As with any indie author, your kind participation and candid reviews are always appreciated.

PS. Audiobooks are in the works!